

## LITERATURE, &amp;c.

FROM THE CLUB BOOK.

## THE FATAL WHISPER.

BY JOHN GALT.

THE Marina was crowded with company, and the most distinguished of the Palermitan nobility in open carriages were enjoying the gaiety of the summer evening, and the refreshing air that breathed gently from the bay. I had seated myself on the stone bench which runs along the dwarf wall, with my back to the sea, enjoying the active and cheerful scene, when a capuchin friar took a place beside me.

He was a middle aged man, with a pensive cast of countenance, and evidently suffering from infirmity. His appearance, without being remarkable, had less ecclesiastical gravity than is commonly observable among the monks.

In reply to some incidental question which I happened to address to him, he replied in English, and immediately rose, and went away. Next evening I seated myself on the same spot; he also returned, and again sat down beside me. In that way our acquaintance began, and grew to intimacy.

But I will relate his story as he told it. At the time it interested me greatly, and often has it since returned upon my recollection with an indelible sense of sadness, arising more from the feelings which the incidents awakened, than the apparent sensibility with which he described them. The remains of a military manner regulated the tones of his voice, and he spoke of them with as much fortitude as if he had been describing the adventures of a campaign in which an old companion had perished. His voice was firm, but there was a restraint in the utterance that made the tale impressive, and without pain, deeply affecting.

It was indeed singular, and I more than once intimated that he had awakened my curiosity; but it was not till one evening, when I happened to enquire how long he had worn the garb of a friar, that he deemed me worthy of his confidence.

'It is convenient,' said he, 'but it is not on that account I have assumed it;' and then he abruptly added, as if the restraint he had put upon himself had suddenly given way, 'I much prefer the convent to any other lodging. The friars are sedate and good men; and although they know I am a Protestant, they never trouble me with any sort of religious controversy.'

Though accustomed to his thoughtful physiognomy, it seemed to me that in saying this, the cast of his countenance underwent a change, and that he looked, more than I had ever before remarked, like one whom adversity had touched with no gentle hand. After a momentary pause he began his story:

On the return of the army from Alexandria, said he, the transport in which I had embarked, with several other officers, became leaky, and we bore away for Messina to repair, or to obtain another vessel. On entering the port, being under quarantine, the passengers disembarked at the Lazaretto, where they found apartments, and were too happy in taking possession of them, after the vile Egyptian rooms and the discomfort we had suffered in the transport.

The person who attended to receive our daily orders, sometimes brought the English newspapers; I read them with an oppressive eagerness, expecting to hear something of my friends, but to me they were ever barren; all my companions, one after the other, met with some little notice or paragraph which gave them pleasure, but none such event appeared to me.

The dullness of the lazaretto, a square court with a cemetery in the area, would of itself have effected the spirits of most men; but the silence of the newspapers towards me seemed more ominous of misfortune, and filled my imagination with apprehensions and vague fears to which neither name nor other cause could be assigned. When the period of quarantine was complete, and all my companions were joyous at being released, I was irresistibly depressed, and in answer to their raillery could only tell that some unaccountable burden weighed upon my spirits, and would not be shaken off by any resolution.

On the day we were at liberty we dined together, and had several English officers then in the garrison as guests. In the evening, we all went to the theatre—the house was crowded. Every box was engaged, which obliged us to take places in the pit. You are aware that owing to the subdivision of the benches in the Sicilian theatres, it sometimes happens that a party is unavoidably separated, the seats being occupied at intervals, by other persons. This took place that night my friends were dispersed in different parts of the house, and I was by myself in one of the sittings at the end of the last bench.

I had not been long seated when several other officers came in, with a gentleman in plain clothes, who, as

I overheard in the course of his conversation with them, had only that afternoon arrived by the packet from England. He had been the schoolfellow of one of the officers, with whom he was gay and free, telling him of their gay companions, and also of his own exploits since they left Eaton. Among other things he mentioned that the cause of his coming abroad was an intrigue in which he had been engaged with a married lady. It had been discovered by the landlady of an inn on the Bath road, who had threatened to disclose the whole affair to the friends of his paramour. 'But,' said he, 'I bought her silence, and have for a few months come out of the way.' The name of the lady he did not disclose, indeed refused, but boasted of his success, and of the long time that the guilty intercourse had continued.

The story attracted my particular attention, and yet there was nothing in the circumstances calculated to make any lasting impression, save only the art and craft of the lady, which he described with contempt and derision, as the result of her experience in deception.

On returning to the hotel from the theatre, which I did alone, before the opera was over, I found, with letters from my wife, a bundle of newspapers. Maria had been for some time, she said, unwell, and had been advised to try the Bath waters; it had, however, so happened that my mother had also been seized with a dangerous illness, which obliged my wife to go hastily to London, where, after waiting some time, she was again advised to return to Bath.

As the letter was written with her wonted tenderness and spirit, I could not but admire the ardour of that filial affection which was so like the earnestness of her love for myself; but when I was about to take up one of the newspapers—it strangely, suddenly, and fearfully flashed across my mind that there was something extraordinary in that journey. In a word, I was wounded with a pang of jealousy, and shook for a time like the aspen. And yet my heart acknowledged that there never was a woman more simple in all her ways than Maria—more pure in her heart and spirit—more enthusiastic in her affections. The thought, as it crossed my imagination, was a black demon passing between me and the heavens, eclipsing the unclouded sun. Still I could not reason myself from the horror of suspicion, which, like an envenomed dart, rankled in my bosom. It seemed as if the augury which had previously darkened my spirit was confirmed.—I arose from my seat—I traversed the room in distraction, and abandoned myself, without a reason, to the wildest imaginations.

When I had for some time given scope to the full force of the dreadful passion which had so demoniacally possessed me, the cloud passed from my understanding, and I became more calm. I felt even repugnance at myself for having done such injury to my wife in my thoughts; and remorse, like drops of molten sulphur, for the injustice, dropped in greater anguish than fire, upon my heart. I soon after grew more rational, and calmly opened the paper.

For some time nothing interesting attracted my notice, but among the gossiping paragraphs, I discovered two lines evidently inserted by authority, for there was a tint of satire in them, praising the filial devotion of a gallant officer then with the army in Egypt; and how, though herself an invalid, she had made a journey to London to comfort his aged mother, who was less in need of consolation than herself.

This sentence was a shower of bullets in my bosom. The paroxysm of jealousy returned, barbed with a hateful possibility. But I may spare you and myself the description of an agony which language can never express. That too, however, after a time, also subsided. I again had recourse to another number of the newspaper, and in it there was a dignified answer to the slander implied in the wording and marking of the paragraph that had so disturbed me.

But it failed to soothe, for the gentleman had described the craft of his paramour.

This made my case worse—no adequate idea can be given of my thoughts that night. I retired to my own chamber, I wept, I vowed the harshest revenge. But what could I do—what proof had I to charge my rival with having dishonoured my family? Him I could not even address. The night was spent in a whirlwind, and I could bring myself to no determination.

At daybreak I went to a convent; where I had then a friend, who, under the name of Anselmo, had long resided there. I had known him when, previously to the Egyptian expedition, I had been quartered in Messina; he was a sensible sedate character, possessed of a judicious knowledge of the world. To him I confided my hideous apprehensions, and when I had ended the impassionate narrative, he remained for some time thoughtful, and then said—

'Go to your hotel, let no one have any cause to suspect your tears, and come back to me in the afternoon, by which time I shall be prepared to offer you some advice.'

I did as he suggested:—fortunately my companions,

in the gaiety of their spirits, had resolved to visit the environs, I feigned a headach, declined to go with them, and thus was left undisturbed.

Whether Father Anselmo had in the mean time consulted with my friend on my unhappy case was not disclosed, but when, at the time appointed, I met him at the portal, he was taking leave of another elder friar, who, as I entered, eyed me with a melancholy look. I passed on, however, and was immediately followed by Anselmo, who, instead of conducting me back to his cell, led me into the chapel, which at the time was empty. It is a gorgeous sanctuary; the shrines and monuments numerous, and though the lighted altars sent forth a dim splendour, there was something in the air and aspect of the place which weighed upon my heart as if the tranquillity which reigned around, had been palpable.

When we had walked in silence to a confessional, which stood at the east end of the chapel, near the high altar, Father Anselmo went into the chair.—'I am not,' said he, ingrained with our religion, as to deem this an occasion that will not sanction the indecorum—kneel to me as if you were a penitent, and I will answer you as sincerely as if the sin which has brought us here were of your own commission. Kneel, no one will then interrupt us, if your agitation master your fortitude.

I knelt, scarce knowing what I did. When I had bent forward about a minute to the auricle of the confessional, Father Anselmo said—

'There is a cause to justify you to suspect.'

I groaned with anguish, and made no reply.

'But let no one still suspect the secret of your heart—write to your wife as if you never questioned her fidelity—go home with all the speed you can—but, before you see her, go to the inn where the discovery was made. The landlady was bribed to silence—a better price will unlock her tongue—and your own sagacity will then direct you what should be done, if it should prove the adultery was your wife.'

'She shall die,' cried I aloud, starting in an agony on my feet;—at that instant the newly arrived stranger with his friend, the officer, entered the church. I cannot describe the tempest of my soul at that moment.

'It is he,' I exclaimed, pointing him out to the friar. 'Compose yourself,' was his answer. 'Let us question him; I am calmer than you; leave the business to me.'

To be concluded in our next.

(FROM DOUGLAS'S PROSPECTS OF BRITAIN.)

## ON THE FOREIGN POLICY OF GREAT-BRITAIN.

THERE are two paths of greatness open to Britain, those of peace and of war. By both these she might attain to very extended sway: the wars that would be profitable to her are those which are at a distance; her field of battle does not lie upon the continent. The nation which would make less resistance would offer a far richer spoil, and an acquisition more easily retained. A smaller army than that which fought in the peninsula, and, during a shorter period of time, would make Britain mistress of the ancient country of the Pharaohs, of Syria, and of Cyprus, would carry her standard to the sources of the Nile,—would break down the brazen wall that surrounds China, and include Japan amongst the number of her dependencies. A small military colony of horsemen, somewhat on the plan of the Russian Cossacks, if established on the frontiers of the Cape of Good Hope, could at any time, besides defending the border line, enlarge itself into a little army by incorporating a number of blacks, and, instead of spreading devastation, like Genghis and other predatory tribes, might diffuse peace and security through a considerable portion of the interior of Africa. But war, even when attended with success, and pursued as the instrument of conferring benefits on the vanquished, seems repugnant to the milder spirit of Christianity, and is unfavourable to the lasting prosperity of the conquering country itself. The present circumstances of the world would make it necessary for Britain always to have a large land and sea force in readiness, but the less they are employed in actual warfare the better. To attain eminence, there is nothing like unity of design. The nations that have been eminent in war have had but that one object in view, and have only existed to conquer others. Britain, if prosperous, must ever be a commercial country, and if so, is unfitted for permanent and extensive conquests. The preservation of peace is her true line of policy; and her great object should be never to be turned aside, even for a moment, from the one great design of becoming the head of the world, in the spread of religion, in the promotion of knowledge, and in the diffusion of her commerce.

It must be confessed, however, that war, though ruinous in theory, and in its actual tendencies, has as yet contributed chiefly to the prosperity of the more eminent states. Such is the condition of our fallen nature, that peace and security have not been found sufficient for the development of its powers, and that the presence and pressure of evil has seemed necessary to call out its full exertions. Those states also which enjoy long repose have been overruled by luxury and vice, and a certain mixture of calamity appears requisite even for the preservation of prosperity. But Britain has an impulse to exertion, which may supply the want of the stimulus of war. Her existence, as an independent country, is at stake, and can only be preserved in the extension of her commerce, and the advancement of her knowledge; and though a long peace may cast other nations into a fatal security, and expose them to the attempt of the first invader, yet the circumstances of Britain, which render a considerable army and fleet essential, appear, under Divine Providence, to avert this