

## Literature, &amp;c.

## THE POOR GENTLEMAN'S SON.

By Mrs. Cornwell Baron Wilson.

## CHAPTER I.

At the time when not only our own country, but the whole civilized world, was startled at the new page which had been added to the annals of human crime; when the atrocities of Burk and his companions were spoken of with disgust and horror, even by profligacy itself—when the inhabitants of every city in the kingdom were disturbed with rumors of their church yards being violated, and the feelings of relatives outraged by the harrowing thought, that the bodies of their kindred—the father, brother, the mother, perhaps the wife or sister—those gentle ones whose very dust is sacred, and whose dust is hallowed in the heart, were mangled and exposed upon the dissecting table; it was then that a beautiful girl, the daughter of an officer's widow, died in London. She left a brother a few years older than herself, they were the widow's only children.

Frank Hamilton was twenty-two. His father, a major in the army, a short time before his death, obtained the promise of a pair of colours for his son. He had now been dead three years, and the promise was not yet fulfilled. He left no fortune, and Frank was still dependant on his mother;—a burden on her humble pittance. It was a life which to most men would have been a painful one, to him it was agony. He was too proud to dun his patron, and too sanguine not to trust him. Weeks, months, and years, passed away; without a profession, without earning a shilling, he lived in hope. If in the evening he was wretched with despondency, the morning sun brought confidence with its gladdening beams; his state of mind prevented him from directing his thoughts to any means of temporary employment; he was fitted for few, and these were difficult to be obtained. The feelings, perhaps the prejudices of his education made him shrink from others, there was yet a 'to-morrow' to atone for the disappointment of to-day. And to-morrow went, and came again; but hope lingered still.

It was a life of bitterness. Youth's burning ambition and manhood's native pride, rebelled at the dull routine of his dependant condition; his character was ardent, but sensitive and generous, and the chivalry of his feelings made them prey upon himself. It crushed the buoyancy of his spirits, and damped the exhilaration which was natural to his years; but did not engender moroseness, for his nature had not selfishness for that; nor did it make his countenance abject, for Frank possessed that native dignity which poverty cannot hide, nor wealth bestow, and which when the heart beats proudly, although beneath a threadbare coat, will still reveal the aspect of a gentleman.

Yet his sorrows had a solace. There was one who could soothe him in his most troubled moments, who could decoy his anxious mind to scenes of the past, and visions of the future that he loved to dwell upon;—who understood and admired his character, pitied his sufferings, and loved him with all her heart. It was his sister; the being whose gentle sympathy made life endurable, and whom he loved with an affection equal to her own. And Lucy Hamilton was a sister of whom a brother might have well been proud. She was in her nineteenth year, graceful and lovely, her mind was cultivated and generous, and her heart as pure, as warm and affectionate as ever woman's was. Every body that knew her loved her, but to her brother she was dearer than life itself. She was the good genius of his dreary destiny; the truest happiness his young life had ever known, he ascribed to her; she embodied his fondest ideas of all that was best and beautiful in earth and heaven. She died.

It was of a fever. Her illness was a short one. A week before she had walked with him, hung upon his arm, and looked up to his face to see him smile again. On her death bed she remembered the tales she had shuddered at, the instincts of humanity gave them terror even then, and she whispered to her brother, 'let them watch my grave.'

The simoon that is said to blast the verdure of the tree it sweeps over, and leaves the boughs bared and blackened withered blossoms scattered on the soil, may be compared in effects to those created in Frank Hamilton's mind by his sister's death. It left him desolate, his little world of happiness was blotted out, the storms of life might burst upon him, the friend was gone who knew his sympathies, who alone could pity or caecr, or if the triumphs he had once

panted for, should be his lot, there was no one to share them now. The mother's grief was wild and heart-touching for her lovely girl, the brother's was more calm, but the iron had entered into his soul; the world to him was now a wilderness, in which he stood alone.

He returned from the funeral, and entered the silent deserted parlour. There was no fond smile to meet him, no kind look to mark his troubled eye, no sweet toned voice to whisper hope, and chase away his gloom; he felt that first cold blank which death creates, when the body, the poor ashes, for they filled a place, are gone; when the sun shines, when the household duties proceed, the unheeding faces pass, and the heedless laugh of the bustling world says, 'your sorrows are your own.'

Evening came on, and he remembered his sister's request. It touched a chord in his bosom. A fearful thought for the first time arose in his mind. With restless dread he saw night approach, and formed the resolution to watch the grave himself. His startled mother when he informed her of this, in vain endeavoured to dissuade him from this, others could be procured; his state of mind and body alike unfitted him for such a task; but Frank's course was taken. He put pistols in his pocket, buttoned himself up in his great coat, and departed on his melancholy errand. The Sexton assured him that the duty he assigned himself was unnecessary; that the police, the high walls, the watchman in the neighbourhood of the place were sufficient to protect it; but Frank was deaf to these representations, he demanded admission, and was left in the churchyard by his sister's grave.

It was a calm winter night. The sky rose high, the bright stars trembled there as pure and beautiful as if instead of the gray tombstones of a city burial ground, they were shining on a summer lake. The air was keen and nipping, the sounds of passing carriages died away on the forsaken streets, the cry of the traveller ceased, and the silence became as deathlike as the scene.

Day dawned, and Frank still sat there. His head was drooping on his hands, his hat was silvered with the hoar frost, and his face was wan and care worn.

The following night he kept the same gloomy watch. The sky during the day had been overcast, and at sunset the rain fell. It continued all that night. The stars were shrouded, the black clouds mingled with the darkness, and the wind blew pitilessly. The streets were sooner deserted, the lights in the distant windows were extinguished one by one, the watchman sought shelter from the rapid rain, and Frank sat alone among the dead. Once he thought he heard footsteps approaching, he started, and listened with breathless attention, the sound ceased, he heard only the gusts of the wind, the pattering of the rain, and the quick beating of his own heart. His eyes could not penetrate the darkness, the sounds were not renewed. 'It was the rain dashing on the tombs,' thought he, 'my imagination has deceived me. It may well do so, while my mind doubts so often its own consciousness, and asks if all this is real?'

The cold bleak morning came again, the gray light struggled through the watery clouds, life and labor awakened in the busy city, and Frank passed from the silent churchyard into the noisy street. He returned home and retired to rest, to gain strength for the watching of another night. On removing his clothes he fainter, and was afterwards seized with a violent fit of shivering. His mother, sorrow stricken as she was from other causes, had passed an unhappy night on his account, and now stood weeping by his side. At length, wearied nature, more than her assiduous ministering, relieved him, and he slept.

The red wintry sun was sinking in the horizon and its feeble rays trembling in the silent chamber, when Frank awoke from his troubled slumber. His hot forehead seemed chained to the pillow, a burning fever seized him, his languid spirits sunk, and entreaties of his mother at length overcame his resolution of going forth that night again. The Sexton was requested to procure a watchman, he promised to do so.

Ill, wearied, vexed, and exhausted, Frank sank into a state of stupor. But with the morning consciousness returned; and he reproached himself for his absence from his sister's grave. 'It was her last request,' thought he, 'and I have neglected it; my slightest wish never met neglect from her, she would sit and watch night and day for me, there was no sacrifice she would not make, and yet I have deserted her very ashes, and left them to a hireling's care. His unhappi-

ness increased the fever, and he spent a day of wretchedness.

Night came on again, and his mother renewed her entreaties that he would not stir abroad. Enfeebled in mind and body; notwithstanding the anguish he had already felt, he had no spirit to bear up against her pressing solicitations and once more acceded to them. She left him and retired to rest. But Frank could not sleep; dark surmises continued to rise like phantoms in his mind, they haunted and harassed him. The long hours passed slowly by, and the torture of his thoughts increased. At length burning with fever, and maddened with doubt and fear, he arose, dressed himself, and left the house unheard.

He proceeded to the churchyard; the gate was locked; he shouted, but no one answered. He went to the Sexton and roused him. The man was loth to quit his warm bed to go out in such a night but Frank, frenzied with impatience and alarm, would not be denied. A dark lantern was procured, and they went together to the burying ground. The heavy gate was swung open, they entered and reached the grave. It presented no mark of having been disturbed, yet Frank was not satisfied. He insisted that it should be opened? The Sexton refused, and the other, now agitated to fierceness, compelled him to bring his spade, and commence this singular task. The turf was removed, the brown mound was shovelled away, and the Sexton stood on the deepening grave. The wind howled over the place, the rain kept falling fast, and the night was pitchy dark. Frank held up the lantern, he was deadly pale but his eyes were wild and restless. The Sexton struck his spade upon the coffin, and declared that no one had disturbed it.

Frank with a sudden impulse held the lantern into the grave. 'There is a white splinter,' cried he in a startling voice, 'remove the earth at the coffin head.'

The man did so, the ground seemed looser there, he uttered an exclamation of surprise, the last shovelful showed that the head of the coffin had been wrenched off, he stooped down—and he found it empty.

'Oh God,' cried Frank, 'my sister.' He staggered and fell senseless on the cold wet turf.

## CHAPTER II.

The Sexton raised him, and held up the lantern in alarm. Its feeble light threw a pale glare upon the face, and made it ghastlier the rain drops; fell unheeded upon it, he did not breathe. There was no assistance near; the man became more alarmed, the heavy shower was pattering on the empty coffin in the open grave; the sound grated on the ear, he shivered with horror, and panic stricken, was about to fly from the spot, when a heavy breathing, like a stifled sob, from the youth he supported in his arms, made him remain and abide the issue of this fearful scene.

Consciousness returned, and Frank sank upon a tombstone, and covered his face with his hands. Meantime the Sexton was filling up the grave. It was soon level with the ground, and he was raising the round mound again, when Frank arose, and holding the lantern to the spot, desired him to conceal all traces of its having been disturbed.

The man, surprised at his collected manner, gave a sudden glance towards him, but was startled at the look he encountered. The eyes of the youth were bright and sparkling, his face, his lips were of ashy paleness, and a certain wildness of disposition seemed to struggle with the calm air he forced himself to assume. The Sexton, however, obeyed or seemed to obey, he piled the little mound carefully, scraped the scattered earth from the sides of the grave, and covered it with the turf again.—Frank, with the lantern examined it, the Sexton threw his spade upon his shoulder, and asked him if he were satisfied.

'I am,' said the other, 'and now I would speak with you.'

The man paused as if he waited to hear him.

'It rains hard,' continued Frank, 'I will accompany you to your house.'

His companion muttered something about the lateness of the hour. Frank suddenly raised the lantern. The man seemed to shrink from the scrutiny. Without another word they left the churchyard and in a few minutes found themselves in a room in the Sexton's house.

The first thing Frank did was to lock the door and put the key in his pocket. He then seated himself, and taking a pair of pistols from his great coat pocket, laid them on the table before him. The light now revealed more fearfully his wild and haggard aspect. He was evi-

dently highly excited, and this the stern calmness of manner which he continued to preserve could not hide.

The Sexton watched him with increasing uneasiness, but seemed anxious to avoid his keen and scrutinizing look.

'My sister's grave has been robbed,' said Frank in the same calm tone. 'Can you guess where the body is?'

'Me!—Not I—Lord, sir, how can I guess!—This is the first time our churchyard has ever—'

'Which of the schools do you think most likely to have obtained the body?'

'The Lord above only knows, sir. There is Dr. \* \* \* \*s, and Dr. \* \* \* \*s. I hear both of them have been badly supplied this winter.'

'There is Dr. \* \* \* \*s.'

'Ah, yes, but that is not a likely place—they—they don't want bodies there.'

'We shall examine Dr. \* \* \* \*s school first,' said Frank, fixing his burning eye upon his companion. The man shrank back. Frank gave a wild laugh.

'They say indeed,' continued he, 'that Sextons sometimes wink at these hellish robberies, and make merchandize of the dead corpses which they have buried. But the Sexton of—is none of these. Nay, keep your seat, or by the God who frowns, and the fiend who laughs, I will shoot you like a dog!' He cocked the pistol and levelled it.

The Sexton crouched in his seat.

'Mark me,' continued Frank, becoming more and more excited, 'to-morrow, before any alarm can have been given, before any communication can have passed between you and these plunderers of graves, we shall go to the nearest magistrate and obtain a warrant to give us the right of search. Hah! if you shout, I fire! We must spend the night together.'

'I cannot sit here 'till morning,' said the Sexton. 'You have no right to act as you do. I will accompany you wherever you please.'

'Hal hal ha! and get you bold upon it.—They say a madman never loads the weapon he threatens with,' said Frank, drawing out the wadding of one of the pistols and shaking out the ball into his hand. 'Now,' continued he loading it again, and examining the priming, 'you see for once that saying is wrong.'

'Do not point the pistol,' cried the other trembling, 'I will not stir.'

'Be it so; yet honest men would cry thanks, if I rid the world of such a miscreant. Hark, how the wind blows, you dog,' continued he with flashing eyes, 'what a fiend are you to torture man's feelings, thus! to sleep when churchyards are robbed, and fill your purse with the price of rifled graves! Ah! my fingers itch to clutch that throat of yours. My poor sister! poor, poor Lucy!—But this dream will pass away, and to-morrow I will tell it to you—yet dream or vision, it is a long, black night. Come, let us have a song—'

And they drank out of skulls newly torn from the grave.

Dancing round them pale spectres are seen, Their liquor is blood, and this horrible stave They shriek—

'Ha, ha, ha, what a craven you are! Will the candle last till day break?'

'It will,' said the trembling Sexton.

'It's cold—cold—and the place smells of the grave. How the rain beats on that rattling window.—Hell's messengers are abroad to night.'

'For God's sake sir,' cried the shivering Sexton, 'do not speak in that way.'

Frank crossed his arms and sank back in his chair. His eyes seemed fixed on vacancy, but on the slightest sound he looked towards the door with a glance as quick and keen as the hawk's when watching her prey.

The morning dawned, the early hours passed tediously away, and Frank sat still with his companion, or rather his prisoner, in that cheerless room. About nine o'clock they proceeded together to the residence of a magistrate. Here his self possession did not desert him. He told the horror struck gentleman the errand on which he came, waited until the Sexton had corroborated his statement, and then, in a firm, confident tone, accused him of having been accessory to the crime, and demanded that he should be retained in custody.

The Magistrate, still more surprised, turned to the Sexton, whose alarmed looks, and vehement protestations of innocence only gave weight to the charge. Frank urged it with renewed excitement, demanded a warrant of search, and that an officer in plain clothes should accompany him.

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