

Literature, &c.

THE SYRIAN LADY.

A SKETCH OF THE CRUSADES.

THERE is something in the first approach of spring, in the building of the young leaves, the freshness of the genial atmosphere, the songs of the small birds, the increasing warmth and lustre of the sun,—as contrasted with the gloomy winter which has just departed,—that cannot fail to awaken ideas of a gay and lively character in all hearts, accessible to the influences of gratitude and love. In compliance, as it were, with this feeling, a custom had more or less generally prevailed among all nations, and in all ages, of celebrating the arrival of this season by merriment, and song, and rural triumph. Like many other admirable practices of the olden time, the setting apart to joy and innocent festivity of the first of May, is now gradually falling into neglect; but at the period of which we are about to treat, not Christmas itself could be observed with more reverential care, than its inviting rival. On Mayday, the evergreens which had decked the cottage and the church, the castle and the cloister, gave way to garlands of such flowers as the mellowing influences of the season had already called into their existence of beauty and perfume;—troops of morris dancers paraded the public ways with their fantastic dresses, glittering blades, and intricate evolutions;—feasting the wassail, without which even pleasure itself was then seemed incomplete, prevailed on every side;—in the crowded city, or in the secluded valley;—in the hut of the surf, or in the turreted keep of his warlike lord;—in the gloom of the convent, or in the glitter of the court, the same feelings were excited, the same animation glowed in every countenance, the same triumphant demonstrations of joy hailed the glad harbinger of sunshine and of summer.

In England, above all other lands—the merry England of antiquity—was this pleasing festival peculiarly dear to all classes of society; at all times a period eagerly anticipated, and rapturously enjoyed, never perhaps was its arrival celebrated by all men with wilder revelry, with more enthusiastic happiness, than on the year, which had accomplished the deliverance of their lion-hearted monarch from the chains of perfidious Austria. It seemed to the whole nation as though, not only the actual winter of the year, with its dark accompaniments of snow and storm, but the yet more oppressive winter of anarchy and misrule, of usurpation and tyranny were about to pass away from the people, which had so long groaned under the griping sway of the bad John, or been torn by the savage strife of his mercenary barons; while their legitimate and honoured sovereign was dragging his dreary hours along in the dungeon, from which he had but now escaped, through the devoted fidelity, and unrivalled art, of the minstrel Blondal.

Now, however, their king was on the throne of his fathers, girt with a circle of those gallant spirits, who had shed their blood like water on the thirsty deserts of Syria; earning not only earthly honour and renown, but—as their imperfect faith had taught them to believe—the far more lofty guerdon of eternal life. Now their national festival had returned—they were called upon by the thousand voices of nature to give the rein to pleasure, and why should they turn a deaf ear to her inspiring call?

The streets of London—widely different indeed from the vast wilderness of walls, which has risen like a phoenix from the ashes of its predecessor, but even at that early age, a vast and flourishing town—were thronged, from the earliest dawn, by a constant succession of smiling faces! old and young;—men and maidens;—grave citizens and stern soldiers;—all yielding to the excitement of the moment, all hurrying from the intricate lanes of the city to greet their king; who had announced his intention of holding a court at Westminster, and proceeding hence at high noon, to feast with the city dignitaries in Guildhall. The open stalls, which then occupied the place of shops, were adorned by a display of their richest wares, decorated with wreaths of a thousand bright colours:—steel harness, from the forges of Milan,—rich velvet for the looms of Genoa,—drinking cups and ewers of embossed gold, glittered in every booth.—The projecting galleries, which thrust forward their irregular gables far across the narrow streets, were hung with tapestries of price; while garlands of flowers stretched from side to side, and the profusion of hawthorn boughs,—with their light green leaves and snowy blossoms,—lent a sylvan appearance to the crowded haunts of the metropolis. From space to space the streets were guarded by the city watch in their white cassocks, and glittering head pieces; while ever and anon the train of some great lord came winding its way—with led horses in costly caparison, squires and pages in the most gorgeous fashion of the day, the banner and the knightly armor of the baron borne before him, from his lodgings in the Minories, or the more notorious Chepe. The air was literally alive with music and light laughter even the shaven and cowed monk,—as he threaded his way through the motley concourse,—suffered the gravity of his brow to relax into a smile, when he looked upon the undisguised delight of some fair girl, escorted by her trusty bachelor,—now stepping to gaze on the foreign curiosities displayed in decorated stalls—now starting in affected terror from the tramp and snort of the proud war horse, or mustering a frown of indignation at the unlicensed salutation of its courtly rider,—now laughing with unexpressed glee, at the strange antics of the mummers and morrifiers, who, in every disguise that fancy could suggest, danced and tumbled through the crowded ways,—heedless of the

disturbance which they excited, or the danger they incurred from the hoofs of charges, which were prancing along in constant succession, to display the equestrian graces and firm seat of some young aspirant for the honours of chivalry.

The whole scene was in the highest degree picturesque, and such as no other age of the world could afford. The happiness, which although fleeting and fictitious, threw its bright illumination over the whole multitude, oblivious of the cares, the labours, and the sorrows of tomorrow, affording a subject for the harp of the poet, no less worthy his inspired meditations, than the gorgeous colouring and the rich costume of the middle ages might lend to the pencil of a Leslie or a Newton.

In a chamber overlooking with its Gothic casements this scene of contagious mirth,—alone,—unmoted by the gay hum which told of happiness in every passing breeze,—borne down as it would appear, by the weight of some secret calamity,—sat Sir Gilbert Eglinton! of glorious form and unblemished fame, the bravest of the brave on the battle plain,—unequaled for wisdom in the hall of council,—he had been among the first of those bold hearts, who had buckled on their knightly armor, to fight the good fight of Christianity;—to rear the cross above the crescent; and to redeem the Saviour's sepulchre from the contaminating sway of the unbeliever.

There was not one among the gallant thousands, who had followed their lion-hearted leader from the green vales of England to the sultry sands of Palestine,—whose high qualities had been more frequently tried; or whose undaunted valor was more generally acknowledged, than the knight of Elington.—There was not one, to whose lance the chivalrous Richard looked more confidently for support; nor one to whose counsel he more willingly inclined his ear.—In the last desperate effort before the walls of Ascalon, when with thirty knights alone the English monarch had defied the concentrated powers, and vainly sought an opponent in the ranks of sixty thousand musklemen;—his crest had shone the foremost in those fierce encounters, which have rendered the name of the *Mede Ric* a terror to the tribes of the desert, that has endured even to the present day. It was at the close of this bloody encounter that, conquered by his own previous exertions, rather than by the prowess of his foemen,—his armour hacked and rent,—his war steed slain beneath him,—he had been overwhelmed by numbers while wielding his tremendous blade beside the bridle rein of his kieg, and borne away by the Saracens into hopeless captivity.

Days and months had rolled onwards, and the limbs of the champion were wasted, and his constitution sapped by the vile repose of the dungeon; yet never for an instant had his proud demeanor abated, or his high spirit quailed beneath the prospect of an endless slavery. All means had been resorted to by his turbaned captors, to induce him to adopt the creed of Mahomet,—threat of torments such as was scarcely endured by the martyrs of old,—promises of dominion, and wealth, and honor,—the agonies of thirst and hunger,—the allurements of beauty almost superhuman,—had been brought to assail the faith of the despairing but undaunted prisoner; and each temptation has been tried, but to prove how unflinching was his resolution, and how implicit his faith in the Rock of Ages, which he had ever served with enthusiastic, at least if erring zeal,—and with a fervency of love which no peril could shake, no pleasure could seduce from its serene fidelity.

At length when hope itself was almost dead within his breast: when ransom after ransom had been vainly offered; when the noblest Moslem captives had been tendered in exchange for his inestimable head; and to crown the whole, when the no-longer united powers of the crusading league had departed from the shores on which they had lavished so much of their best blood; his deliverance from the fetters of the infidel was accomplished by one of those extraordinary circumstances which the world calls chance, but which the Christian knows how to attribute to the infinite mercies of an over-ruling Providence.—The eagerness of the politic sultan,—whose name ranks as high among the tribes of Islam, as the glory of his opponents among the pale sons of Europe,—to obtain proselytes from the nations,—which he had the sagacity to perceive were no less superior to the wandering hordes of the desert in arts, than in arms,—had led him to break through the laws which are so intimately connected with the religion of Mahomet—the laws of the harem! As the pious faith of the western warrior appeared to gain fresh vigor from every succeeding temptation; so did the anxiety of his conqueror increase, to gain over to his cause a spirit the value of which was daily rendered more and more conspicuous. In order to bring about this end, after every other device had failed, he commanded the admission to the Briton's cell of the fairest maiden of his harem; a maid whose pure and spotless beauty went farther to prove her unblemished descent, than even the titles which were assigned to the youthful Lilla, of almost royal birth.—Dazzled by her charms, and intoxicated by the fascination of her manner, her artless wit, and delicate timidity, so far removed from the unbridled passion of such other eastern beauties as had visited his solitude,—the Christian soldier betrayed such evident delight in listening to her soft words, and such keen anxiety for a repetition of the interview, that the oriental monarch believed that he had in sooth prevailed. Confidently however as he had calculated on the conversion of the believing husband by the unbelieving wife, the bare possibility of an opposite result had never once occurred to his distorted vision. But truly has it been said—*"magna est veritas et prevalebit"*—the dam-

sel who had been sent to create emotion in the breast of another, was the first to become its victim herself; she whose tutored tongue was to have won the prisoner from the faith of his fathers, was herself the first to fall away from the creed of her race. Enamored, beyond the reach of description, of the good knight,—whose attractions of person were no less superior to the boasted beauty of the oriental nobles, than his rich and enthusiastic mind soared above their prejudiced understandings—she had surrendered her whole soul to a passion as intense as the heat of her native climate; she had lent a willing ear to the fervid eloquence of her beloved, and had drunk in fresh passion from the very language which had won her reason from the debasing superstitions of Islamism to the bright and everlasting splendors of the Christian faith. From this moment the eastern maid became the bride of his affections,—the solace of his weary hours,—the object of his brightest hopes.—He had discovered that she was worthy of his love, he was sure that her whole being was devoted to his welfare, and he struggled no longer against the spirit with which he had battled, as unworthy his country, his name, and his religion. It was not long ere the converted maiden had planned the escape, and actually effected the deliverance, of her affianced lover; she had sworn to join him in his flight; she had promised to accompany him to his distant country, and to be the star of his ascendant destinies, as she had been the sole illumination to his hours of desolation and despair.—Rescued from his fetters, he had lain in concealment on the rocky shores of the Mediterranean, anxiously awaiting the vessel which was to convey him to the land of his birth, and her whose society alone could render his being supportable. The vessel arrived!—but what was the agony of his soul on learning that she—whom he prized above light, and life, and all, save virtue—had fallen a sacrifice to the furious disappointment of her indignant countrymen. Maddened with grief, and careless of an existence which had now become a burthen, rather than a treasure, he would have returned to avenge the wrongs of his lost Lilla, and perish on her grave; had not her emissaries,—conscious that in such a case the fate, which had befallen the mistress, must undoubtedly be theirs likewise,—compelled him to secure their commonsafety by flight. After weary wanderings, he had returned a heart-stricken wretch to his native England, at that moment rejoicing with unfeigned delight at the recovery of her heroic king; he sometimes mingled in the labors of the council, or the luxuries of the banquet, but it was evident to all that his mind was far away! that for him there might indeed be the external semblance of joy, but that all within was dark and miserable! it was plain that, in the words of the poet,

"That heavy chill had frozen o'er the fountain of his tears,  
And though the eye may sparkle still, 'tis where the ice appears."

On the morning of universal joy—to him a period fraught with the gloomiest recollections, for it was the anniversary of that sad day—on which he had parted from the idol of his heart, never to behold her more!—On this morning, he had secluded himself from the sight of men; he was alone with his memory! His eyes rested on the letters of an illuminated missal which lay before him; but the long dark lock of silky hair, which was grasped in his feverish hand, showed too plainly that his grief was still of that harrowing and fiery character, which prevents the mind from tasting as yet the consolations of divine truth. He had, sat thus for hours, unconscious of the passing multitude, whose every sound was borne to his unheeding ears by the fresh breeze of spring. His courtly robe, and plumed bonnet, his collar, spurs, and sword, lay beside him, arranged for the approaching festival by his officious page; but no effect could have strung his nerves or hardened his heart, on that day, to bear with the frivolous ceremonies and false glitter of a court. He recked not now, whether his presence would lend a zest to the festival, or whether his absence might be construed into offence! The warrior, the politician, the man—were merged in the lover! Utter despondency had fallen upon his spirit—like the oak of his native forests he was proud and unchanged in appearance, but the worm was busy at his heart. Even tears would have been a relief to the dead weight of despair which had beclouded his very soul;—but never, since that fatal hour, had one drop relieved the aching of his brain, or one smile gleamed across his haggard features. Mechanically he fulfilled his part in society; he moved, he spoke, he acted, like his fellow men; but he was now become,—from the most ardent and impetuous of his kind,—a mere creature of habit and circumstance.

So deeply was he now absorbed in his dark reveries, that the increasing clamor of the multitude had escaped his attention, although the character of the sounds was no longer that of unmingled pleasure. The voices of men, harsh and pitched in an unnatural key, rude oaths, and tumultuous confusion, proclaimed that, if not engaged in actual violence, the mob was at least ripe for mischief. More than once, during the continuance of these turbulent sounds, had the plaintive accents of a female voice been distinctly audible—when on a sudden a shriek arose, of such fearful import, close beneath the casements of the abstracted baron, that it thrilled to his very heart. It seemed to his excited fancy, that the notes of a well remembered voice lent their music to that long-drawn cry; nay he almost imagined that his own name was indistinctly blended in that yell of fear. With the speed of light, he had sprung to his feet, and hurried to the lattice; but twice before he reached it, had the cry been repeated, calling on the name of "Gilbert" with a plaintive energy, that could no lon-

ger be mistaken. He gained the embrasure, dashed the trellised blinds apart—and there—struggling in the licentious grasp of the retainers, who ministered to the brutal will of some haughty noble—her raven tresses scattered to the winds of heaven,—her turbaned shawl, and flowing caftan, rent and disordered by the rude hands of lawless violence—he beheld a female form of unrivalled symmetry, clad in the well remembered garments of the east. Her face was turned from him, and the dark masses of hair, which had escaped from their confinement entirely concealed her features; still there was an undefined resemblance which acted so keenly upon his feelings, that the thunder of heaven could scarcely burst with a more appalling crash above the heads of the guilty, than did the powerful tones of the crusader as he bade them—"as they valued life, release the damsel!" With a rapid shudder, which ran through every limb at his clear summons, she turned her head. It was! it was his own lost Lilla!—the high and polished brow,—the eyes that rivalled in languor the boasted organs of the wild gazelle,—the rapturous ecstasy that kindled every lineament, as she recognized her lover's form,—

—the voice that clove through all the din,  
As a lute's pierceth through the cymbal's clash,  
Jarred but not drowned by the loud brattling—

were all! all Lilla's!—To snatch his sword from its scabbard, to vault at a single bound from the lofty casement, to force his way through the disordered press, to level her audacious assailants to the earth, was but a moment's work for the gigantic power of the knight, animated as he now was, by all those feelings which can minister valor to the most timid, and give strength to the feeblest arm! He beheld her whom he had believed to be snatched for ever from his heart! nor could hundreds of mail clad soldiers have withstood his furious onset! He had already clasped his recovered treasure in one nervous arm, whilst with the other he brandished aloft his sword and blade, which had so often carried havoc and terror to the centre of the Moslem lines; when the multitude enraged at the interference of a stranger with what to them appeared the indubitable occupation of persecuting a wretch who had fled, seconded by the bold ruffians who had first laid hands upon the lovely foreigner, rushed boldly onward, threatening to overpower all resistance by the weight of numbers! gallantly however, and at the same time mercifully, did Sir Gilbert Elington support his previous reputation; dealing sweeping blows with his huge falchion on every side, yet shunning to use the point or edge, he had cleft his way in safety to the threshold of his own door; yet even then the final issue of the strife was far from certain, for so sudden had been the exit of the baron, and from so unusual an outlet, that not one of his household were conscious of their lord's absence, and the masny portal was closed against the entrance of the lawful owner. Stones and staves flew thick around him, and so fiercely did the leaders of the furious mob press upon his retreat, that, yielding at length to the foretates of his excited spirit—he dealt the foremost a blow, which would have felled him to the teeth though he had been fenced in triple steel; thundering at the same time with his booted heel against the oaken leaves of his paternal gate and shouting to page and squire within, till the vaulted passages rang forth in startled echoes.—At this critical moment heard the din of martial music, which had long been approaching, though so actively were the rioters engaged in their desperate onset, and so totally engrossed was the baron in the rescue of his recovered bride, that neither party were aware of the gorgeous cavalcade, that with the winding its long train towards them, till the leaders were actually on the scene of action.—Of stature almost gigantic, noble features, and kingly bearing,—his garb glittering with gold and jewels, till the dazzled eye could scarcely brook its splendor, backing and spirit which seemed as though its strength and might have borne Goliath to the field, and might have borne Goliath to the field, and wielding a blade which no other arm in second-tendom could have poised even for a second, the lion-hearted Richard, followed by his noble of his realm, dashed with his native impetuosity into the centre—"Ha! St. George, he shouted in a voice heard clearly above the mingled clang of instruments, and tumult of conflict,—"Have ye no better way to keep our festival, than thus to take base odds on the one? shame on ye! vile miscreants! what do ye cry as he recognized the person thus knight,—"Our good comrade of Elington thus of England—dare ye match yourselves against the Lion and his brood!"

Loud rang the acclamations of the throng, accustomed to the blunt boldness of their warrior king, and losing sight of his haughty language, in joy for his return, and admiration of the additional glory which had accrued to the whole nation from the prowess of his champion.—"God save thee—gallant lion heart!—never was so brave a knight!—never so noble a king!" Louder still was the wonder of the monarch and his assembled court, when they learned of the strange adventure, which had been brought to so fair a conclusion, by their unexpected savior. The lady threatened with the false indignation of the royal Saladin, though never really in danger of life, had devised that she report of her own death; and knowing also that the eyes of all were concentrated on her in dark and angry suspicion; and knowing also that no dread of instant dissolution, nor hope of liberty could have induced her devoted lover to have quitted the land while she remained in "durance vile."

When the first excitement,—caused by the