

Literature, &c.

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A GREEK MONK'S TALE.

DELIGHTFUL as the twilight of a summer's day always is with us, it is nothing compared with sunset in the East. There, where the sun rolls the living day through a burning sea of light, it is only when at last he disappears that the first sensation of relief from the intense and oppressive heat is experienced; for scarce has he sunk, when there rises up a soft cool breeze, which seems to breathe fresh life into the weary children of men. This evening breeze is named the 'Imbat,' and never was its reviving influence more gratefully felt than by a party of travellers who, not long since might have been seen toiling one evening along a rocky mountain path in Albania. An English gentleman and his daughter, mounted on the strong sure-footed horses of the country, rode on in front, guided by a black-eyed Albanian youth, who leapt from rock to rock like a chamois. Two well-armed Greek servants followed, and an Italian cook, immersed among the pots and pans which shared with him a somewhat unsteady seat on the back of the baggage mule, brought up the rear. The scene through which they were passing was very beautiful, for the rocky path was in truth like a passage, of which the walls were thick bushes of myrtle and oleander, and over their heads rose hill on hill, clothed in variegated wood, that grew in rich luxuriance. Beneath their feet lay a wide shadowless plain, sweeping down to the sea, still bright with the lingering sunbeams, and its monotony relieved by a dark grove of pines in the distance. Nor did this outward landscape present only a pleasing but lifeless picture to the eye; here the fair form of the earth had a spirit, too, in the memories of the past, that gave to every rock and stone a voice to speak impressive lessons. But from the dawn of day this party had been in motion; their horses were weary, their lips were parched with thirst, and one object alone had now any interest for them, and this was the picturesque little monastery perched on the summit of a lofty projection, to which they were slowly ascending and where they hoped the well-known hospitality of the monks would give them shelter for the night. Soon winding up the steep and difficult ascent, they reached the quaint old building, which, with its vineyards, gathered round it and its little chapel of the true Byzantine architecture, formed the only sign of human habitation for miles around. The travellers paused at the arched gateway of rough stone that led into a court, rendered cool and pleasant by the shade of a huge platanus, and the murmur of the water in a beautifully-sculptured fountain, far more ancient than the convent itself.

The clatter of the horses' hoofs quickly attracted the attention of the simple inmates, in whose quiet monotonous life the smallest incident was an event. One by one they came hurrying to the door from different quarters: few in numbers (for the monasteries in Greece, though not altogether interdicted, are so far suppressed, that the members of the various brotherhoods are now allowed to die out, and none are permitted to fill up the vacancies), and forming a very picturesque group as they clustered beneath the gateway in their modest and simple dress. Presently they all made way hastily, and the 'igoumenos,' or superior, passed from amongst them, and came forward. He was a fine-looking old man, his silver beard and flowing white hair relieved to great advantage by his black cap and long dark robe; his countenance was very mild and benevolent, and seemed really stamped with that peace which a monastic life is said by its advocates to impart. The igoumenos welcomed the Englishman with the greatest cordiality, saying that this hour in which he first beheld him should henceforth be named 'the good,' and he gave a fervent blessing to the Greek servants, who pressed forward to kiss his hands. One of them, who spoke Italian, interpreted his master's request for a night's lodging, and the old man answered instantly that the stranger would be as a light in his dwelling; that he would willingly receive them all, the servants, the horses, the mule; but—here he paused, and there seemed to be a great struggle between his sense of duty and his hospitality—but not the lady! The Greek ventured to expostulate; but shook his head very decidedly, and all the monks behind him shook theirs in concert. The Englishman looked dismayed at the prospect of dragging his weary daughter yet ten miles, which was the distance of the nearest village. She herself, however, thought she could perceive on the old man's face much of that happy expression which betokens loving-kindness to all earth's children. She urged her tired horse towards him, and stooping down, said in his own language, 'Good father, I have ridden many miles to-day, and I am very tired.' These few words, uttered by a stranger in a tongue which always has a singular effect on a Greek, were quite enough to move this kind-hearted old man. He turned hastily to the monks, who had not heard the appeal, and exclaimed, 'Children she has ridden many miles, and she is very weary; then, without waiting for their approbation, he lifted her gently from her horse, and the brethren, catching somewhat of the kindly spirit which animated him, flew to open the gate and assist the other travellers in dismounting. The superior led his guest

through the open court into the monastery, with steps far more feeble than those of the tired strangers he was tending so carefully. In the interior of the convent were a number of long, low passages, which conducted, the igoumenos said, to the dormitories of the monks; but it was his intention to place his own room at their disposal, and opening the door, he introduced them to what he rightly called his humble apartment. It was neat and clean, and abundantly decorated with strange old engravings of the saints; but the furniture was very scanty, consisting only of a table covered with books of devotion and a Bible (all very ancient seemingly), a few chairs, and a broad wooden bench placed against the wall, having at one end of it a small carpet and a small cushion stuffed with straw. 'This is the only couch I have to offer you, my daughter,' said the igoumenos with a gentle smile; 'but may you never know a sleep less tranquil than that which I nightly enjoy when stretched on it!' He remained with his guests till he had seen their supper brought in, consisting of excellent grapes from his own vineyard, and the coarse brown bread of the country; but he refused to partake himself even of this simple fare, and left them with many wishes for their good repose and pleasant dreams. Wrapped in their cloaks, and extended on this wooden sofa they might have doubted the likelihood of his wishes being fulfilled; but their fatigues, and the deep quiet of the place, insured their repose. At break of day all were astir to prepare for the departure of the guests; and after breakfast, the younger traveller, still much fatigued, had thrown herself once more upon the couch, when the igoumenos entered. He gave her a paternal blessing, and then, begging her to raise her head, he drew from under the pillow where she had slept a small bag of dollars, containing perhaps ten pounds of English money. Having taken out a small coin, he replaced it, and said with a smile, 'You see how I trust the Inglesi, since I let you sleep all night with my whole fortune under your pillow.'

'Your whole fortune?' she said in surprise. 'Yes,' he answered, 'and I am rich indeed! My wants are few, my wishes fewer, and my necessities as supplied. Daughter, when you have lived as long as I, you will know that there is but one good thing to be desired upon this earth, and that is to be at peace with God and man. But Heaven forbid, my child, that ever you should come to this knowledge by lessons so bitter as those which had the teaching of my soul, or pass to the calm I now enjoy by a struggle so dire as mine has been.'

As the old man spoke, there passed, as it were, a shadow over his face, his lips contracted painfully, and he looked up with that deeply mournful expression which supplies the place of tears in the eyes of a strong man. His guest took his hand gently, and said, 'You have suffered much, my father: tell me your history that I may learn from it the lessons it has taught you.'

'Daughter, you are right,' he answered; 'to what end are the aged left to cumber this earth, except it be to teach the young, ere they sow the seeds of sin and folly themselves, what bitter fruits are to be reaped therefrom.'

They went out together into the fresh morning air, scented with the myrtle and orange flowers in the garden, and sat down on the rough stone seat beneath the gateway. There, with the clear rattle murmuring at her feet, and the bright mountain landscape spread out before her, the English lady listened to the story of the old igoumenos.

'Daughter, these gray hairs and these withered hands have already told you that I am very old. The season of my earliest youth was passed whilst yet this, my dear country, was in the hands of our Moslem tyrants, and her children were ignominious slaves; ere there was even an indication of her sudden and glorious awakening from that lethargy, which held her so long in a hateful submission. My father was a man comparatively wealthy, for he possessed several vineyards, and a house and garden, in the village of Minidi.'

'What! the village of the renegades?' asked the listener.

'The same; and you do well to call it the village of the renegades, for such the inhabitants were indeed, when later, in the noble struggle for independence, they could basely consent to side with the tyrants. You will hear, my child, how this treachery influenced my fate. Meanwhile we dwelt, my father and mother, with their numerous children, in their humble home, uncheered by even a far-off hope of release from our bondage to the Turks.'

'Assuredly it is a bitter thing to be a slave; it is a bitter thing to yield to the oppressors the fruits of the honest labour, so cheerfully performed in the hope that the toil may profit some dear child, or faithful wife, or aged mother; but, daughter, there are joys freely given us by our Creator which the impotent cruelty of man can never altogether destroy. It cannot sap the springs whose sources are in our own selves, and whilst one kindly tie of earth subsists for us we are not comfortless. Yes, we were slaves; but our shackled arms would still twine round the forms we loved; and where was the father that remembered his neck was bowed beneath a foreign yoke, when the little hands of his innocent child were clasped around it? Or where the mother that could stop to weep a degraded country, when all she best loved were smiling at her side? But there came within our happy home (for happy it was, though we were bondsmen) a foe whose deadly power to blight was far

more terrible than that of fiercest Moslem. It chanced, one summer, that instead of the long-continued drought which as you know, ever attends our great heat there was much rain, and continued showers freshened the air around us. We all rejoiced at the pleasant change, little deeming those gentle dews instilling poison into the ground. Those unnatural rains engendered deadly vapours, and they again breathed forth a pestilence which soon laid low both rich and poor, both young and old. On no family in the village did the scourge fall more severely than on ours. My brothers and sisters fell around us in their strength and beauty, till at last none were left but myself, the eldest, and my infant sister, the youngest of the family; and on both the fatal sickness had fallen, the shadow of death seemed to my mother already dark upon us. One night in her extremity of misery, when my little sister breathed faintly, and I, more strong was in my agony, she went to the church, where the ever burning lamp seems the emblem of hopes that cannot fade away; and there she vowed a solemn vow, that if yet even yet, we might be permitted to recover, she would dedicate me, her firstborn, altogether to the service of the Merciful. Her words were not destined to be as seed sown on the winds. We both speedily recovered, and then my mother told me that she had thus disposed of my existence. I had no choice; I could not struggle to resist. The vow was vowed, but it was a bitter trial to me. My father, who had ever felt deeply the oppression of his fallen country, and longed to see it liberated, had, in my early youth, inspired me with his own sentiments; only I was more eager to rush into strife, in order to effect the object. All this was over now; such fiery dreamings were forbidden to one who was not only to be a priest but a monk; and I, poor weak being, thought not then how much more glorious was the combat with evil in which I was to be engaged as a servant of the cross. I received my education at a neighbouring monastery, but I still remained at home, assisting the village priest in his duties.

My mother did not long survive our misfortunes; her heart was torn asunder between her dead and her living children, and she longed to be at rest with them even when she smiled on us. She haunted their graves like a phantom, till at last they drew her down to them, and we laid her to sleep by their side. There remained now in our once cheerful home only my father, becoming daily more feeble and wasted, for he was very aged, and my little sister Photini. They had done well to name her Photini.—(the Light of Day); for she was indeed the light of that old man's declining years, a weary sunbeam in our dwelling. A sweeter, lovelier child never welcom'd the morning sun with songs of praise, or knelt the vesper hour, to breathe out her guileless prayer. She grew up pure and innocent, as seldom, on this earth, it is given to human beings to be; for we lived at some distance from the village, and held little communication with its inhabitants. And I loved to watch over her, that like a fair untainted lily, shaded from the blighting power of the sun, she might dwell in her retirement, nor ever a contaminating breath from the world without sully the brightness of her soul.

And now my daughter, I must speak to you of one whose name trembles on my lips—my best loved on this earth, and my bitterest enemy! You know that, as a monk, I was debarred earth's sweetest affections; for this cause, perhaps I was the more powerfully constrained to concentrate all that my heart could know of tenderness one dear friend. Stavros, the son of the demarque, or governor of Minidi, a noble-looking, bold, spirited young man, who had been my companion from childhood and we had bound ourselves together by that far holier tie than the tie of blood—the union consecrated by the church itself; when, before on the altar, we swore to be brethren in heart and soul, in community of interests and property in truth and faithfulness, till the life of one or both should end; and the priest made the sign of the cross over us, and blessed us, in token that the vow was registered in heaven. Stavros seemed to love me well and truly; and I placed on this fraternal union my whole hopes of happiness on earth. I would have turned with hate from any one who said my brother was aught but perfect. I thought that, if he died, I would die with him. That ever he could change, or could betray me, was a thought not to be for a moment admitted into my mind. Ah, my child, would that you could learn at least this lesson from my early sorrows; let not the fibres of your heart twine themselves round aught that can die or change; there is an Unchangeable and an Undying!

In 1821, as you well know, our glorious revolution broke out. Our beloved country started into life, struggling, it is true, but struggling to be free, and her children opened those fountains of their hearts' best blood, whose course they stayed not till she was liberated from the hateful yoke. It was then that my native place acquired the ignominious title you justly applied to it, it became a village of renegades. The demarque, the vile father of Stavros, not only sided with the Turks, and induced all the inhabitants to do the same, but he offered them Minidi as the head quarters of their troops, whence they might issue forth to carry death and ruin amongst our countrymen. Daughter, you may conceive how bitter were my feelings when I found that the brother of my heart, the being I deemed so faultless, took an active part in this base treachery! It was as though a heavy cloud had come between me and the sun, where for the first time, a shadow seemed to darken a character of him in whose recititude I had trusted with a perfect trust.

Yet I believed Stavros when he told me that had but to choose between his father's curse and the betrayal of his country; and whilst I mourned with him a choice so dire, I loved him the more for the tender weakness which I fancied ruled his actions.

'Shall I ever forget the day when after a skirmish in the neighbourhood in which our countrymen were defeated, the exulting conquerors came thundering into the village, their hands yet reeking with the blood of our brethren, and were received (oh that I should have lived to see it!) with the shouts and acclamations of the treacherous renegades? It were assuredly the darkest day of my existence, but for one yet blacker, whose shadow is upon me even now. My father, my poor old father, feeble, and almost sightless with age, who throughout a long life had borne the detested yoke in very bitterness of his soul; he who had hailed the dawn of independence as now he would have rejoiced in the sun's light he was no more to see—think, my daughter, what it must have been to him to behold his native village a very nest of traitors—a secure resting-place for the oppressors of Greece, the murderers of his countrymen! As he heard the noise of their horses' feet, and the joyous tumult of the war music, he started from his seat, he wrung his withered hands he called out in bitter accents for one—but one yet true to our lost fatherland, who would oppose them, or die in the attempt. Alas, alas! we were both true, but he and I, but powerless! I tried to soothe him, while the blood boiled in my own veins; but when, mingling with the exulting shouts of our enemies, came the cries and groans of the wounded prisoners, the old man's fury rose to madness, and seeming for one brief moment to regain his youth and strength, he burst from my grasp, and from the clinging arms of Photini, who would have held him back. He rushed from the house; he flung himself amongst the horsemen; with his weak arms he dealt uncertain blows. He fell; they trampled him beneath their feet; but a strong passion was alive in his exhausted frame. He rose and uttered curses, which were terrible upon these withered lips; and then they laughed to scorn the aged and powerless defender of his country!

I had followed him. In a moment of reaction I dragged him away. They would soon have forgotten so feeble an enemy; but in that very instant my gentle Photini, her long hair floating in the wind, her sweet face pale with terror, flew into the old man's arms. They had never seen so fair a slave those cruel tyrants! They crowded round her; they would have murdered us, and seized on her. I knew that we were lost; and not the less that their chief, a fierce and daring man, commanded that we should return for the time in safety to our home for that the vengeance and the prize alike belonged to him alone! I dragged him to the house the old man now paralysed, and the sweet child fainting in terror; and when I had barricaded the door, and sat down for one moment's breathing space, I felt that I would save them or perish!

'Happily it was evening; the swift coming darkness would favour the last, the only chance that remained to us—that of flight. But how desolate a prospect it was! To seek a place of refuge amongst the haunts of men, was to rush into the very jaws of the wolf; for the foe who was now more dangerous to us than the whole host of our enemies, was powerful enough to haunt us out, go where we would. I knew of a cave on the hill-side, not far off, which was admirably adapted both for concealment and defence, and where as a boy, I had often hid in play, and baffled the strictest search. As night came on, I could hear, from the wild shouts of revelry, that the Turks were carousing in the market-place with their base allies. Such of the villagers as remained in the houses near, would, I knew, rather aid than oppose our escape. The shock of that horrible struggle had been too much for my father's wasted frame. Life was not extinct, but there had passed a darkness over his soul which was to be removed no more. He had sunk into utter imbecility, and looked at me with a vacant smile, when, anxious to seize so favourable a moment, I urged him to mount the horse I had made him ready. The savage warrior had inspired my little shuddering Photini with horror which overpowered all other thoughts; she buried herself in my arms, and half-shrieked out her prayer that in mercy I would save her from them. Oh miserable, miserable man—that for her these arms should have been powerless at the last! The old priest stopped, half-choked with his emotion; and the listener would have begged him to desist at a painful narrative, but he said, 'No, daughter, you have heard thus far; you must learn how through the fire of tribulation, I was brought to this peace at last. I placed my father and sister, both so helpless, twined in each other's arms, on my horse. I walked by their side, and so we took our desolate way through the dark night. We escaped unmolested, if not unobserved, just as I hoped, and in safety reached the cave. It had been constructed in some ancient time for the very purpose of concealment; and those who did not know the secret of the entrance could not discover it, though they passed quite close. I turned the horse loose, and saw him gallop in wild freedom far over the plains, and I returned to pass the dreary hours with those whom I would have died to comfort or console, crouching together on the cold earth, sad and silent. Ah, daughter it was a piteous sight on which I looked that morning by the first rays of the sun. Often does the remembrance of it come between me and the light, and I think I see them yet again: the old man, his white hair,