

Literature. &c.

THE SPIRIT OF THE MAGAZINES.

CHILDHOOD AND ITS VISITORS.

BY SIR EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON.

Once on a time, when sunny May
Was kissing up the April showers,
I saw fair childhood hard at play
Before a bank of blushing flowers.
Happy—he knew not whence or how;
And smiling—who could choose but love
him?
For not more glad than childhood's brow
Was the gay heaven that laughed above
him.

Old Time kept hobbling in his wrath,
And that green valley's calm invaded;
The brooks grew dry beneath his path,
The birds were mute, the lillies faded;
A Grecian tomb stood full in sight,
And that old Time began to batter;
But childhood watched his paper kite,
Nor heeded he one whit the matter.

With curling lip and eye askance,
Guilt gazed upon the scene a minute,
But childhood's archly simple glance
Had such a holy spell within it,
That the dark demon to the air
Again spread forth his baffled pinion,
And hid his envy and despair.
Self-tortured, in his own dominion.

Then stepped a gloomy phantom up,
Pale, cypress crowned, night's woeful
daughter,
And proffered him a fearful cup,
Full to the brim of bitter water;
Says childhood, "Madame, what's your
name?"
And when the beldame uttered "Sorrow,"
Then cried, "Don't interrupt my game,
I prithee call again to-morrow."

The muse of Pindus thither came,
And wooed him with the softest numbers
That ever scattered wealth and fame
Upon a youthful poet's slumbers.
Though sweet the lyre and sweet the lay,
To Childhood it was all a riddle;
"Good gracious!" cried he, "send away
That noisy woman with a fiddle!"

Then Wisdom stole his bat and ball,
And taught him with most sage endeavor,
Why bubbles rise and acorns fall,
And why no joy may last for ever;
She talked of all the wondrous laws
Which nature's open book discloses;
But Childhood, when he made a pause,
Was fast asleep among the roses.

Sleep on, sleep on!—Pale manhood's dreams
Are all of earthly pain or pleasure;
Of glory's toils, ambition's schemes,
Of cherished love or hoarded treasure;
But to the couch where childhood lies
A pure unmingled trance is given,
Lit up by rays from seraph's eyes,
And glances of remembered heaven!

From Blackwood's Magazine for March.

HESTER BENFIELD.

POOR Hester's heart swelled with gratitude; and the cheerful kindness of her new friend imparted more of hopefulness to her drooping spirits than she had known for many weeks. The next day, seated at her side, and listened to with close attention, Hester entered minutely into the incidents of her past life; with tears she recalled the days of her happy childhood, and spoke of the mother who had been taken from her when most she needed her protection; of her meeting with George Asleigh, and of all that had subsequently occurred.

"He is a gentleman, you say Hester?"
"Yes, I believe so; at least I always considered him to be one; but indeed I did not think much about that at the time—I loved him—she covered her face with her hands and wept afresh—and trusted him, God knows how truly; and it little mattered to me what he was, it would have been just the same. He said he wished me to be better educated, and left me all my studies marked, and how hard I worked to please him through many dreary months, although each day my heart grew fainter and fainter. But I am sure, when he left me, he meant to return as he said, in a few days. Oh! I fear, I fear he must be dead, and I shall never see him again; and the tears fell thickly through her fingers.

"Where you married in the village where you met him first?"
"No; he did not wish any one there to know of our intention, and he went several days before our marriage, that no suspicions might be created, at T—. It was arranged that I should follow afterwards. We were married on the day I joined him, and immediately set out for the pretty spot where, for a fortnight, we lived so happily.

Miss Morris shook her head unperceived by Hester, as she muttered the word "bad."—Have you the certificate of your marriage Hester?"

"No, my husband has it. I remember seeing him place it in his desk."

Another shake of the head, and a repetition of the little word twice over.

"Were there any witnesses to your marriage?"

"I think not, but I really do not know; I was so frightened, and it was all so unlike the merry weddings I had seen at home that—"

"Ah, I fear so, indeed—God help you my poor child."

Old Miss Morris was untiring in her efforts to discover Hester's husband. An advertisement addressed to G. M. A. entreats him to return to his sorrowing wife, was inserted in several of the newspapers, but to no effect.—More for the satisfaction of a friend whom she had consulted than for her own, she wrote privately to the various places at which Hester had lived, and found her statements all corroborated. Her anxiety was much increased by an answer she received to a note she had to the clergyman of the parish in which Hester last resided. He said he had made inquiries about the persons mentioned by Miss Morris, and found that a gentleman of the name of Asleigh had lived in the town for some weeks, having as his companion a young woman who passed for his wife, and who had subsequently disappeared. Miss Morris no longer doubted that Hester had been the victim of a false marriage, but so confident did the poor girl continue of the truth and honor of the man she loved, that her kind friend shrank from expressing this conviction to her. She saw that Hester, in her feeble state of health, could better bear to hear of his death than of his having deceived her.

The time at length came when Miss Morris felt she dared speak on the subject to Hester. It was after her child's birth, when, in recovered strength, she was about to take him to the church to be christened.

"Hester, my dear, what was your father's name?" inquired her friend.

"Frank, Miss Morris."

"A good honest name, and one that I am sure, belonged to an honest man. I hope you will give that name to your boy."

Hester hung her head.

"Hester"—a pause. "Hester, my dear, I must say something to you: you will try to bear it bravely. Hester, I much fear your son cannot honestly bear the name of Asleigh. I have thought it all over again and again, and have spoken to one I can trust on the subject. I fear, my poor child, your marriage was not a real one: I cannot doubt but that you were deceived. God only knows whether he is alive or dead. You are not the first victim this wicked world has seen. Hester, nor will you be the last; your case is one that is but too common, I grieve to say. Oh, if women were not so ready to fall in love and marry, and—that sort of thing, how much better off would they be. Look at me, Hester; I do not believe there is faith or truth in any man living—but one; well, I must except him; I do think Dr. Thornton a true-hearted man. I had once other notions, but, thank heaven, I have out-lived them.

"Hester, Hester Benfield," with a stress on the surname, "resume the name under which you were happiest—the honest name which never called a blush to your cheek—and let your son be called by it likewise. Now weep here, my poor one, but let us not speak more on this sad subject; and Hester's arms were thrown around the old lady's neck, and her sobs hushed on her sympathising bosom.

Frank Benfield was a fine boy of seven years of age, when one day a quiet party, decorated with a few white favours, set out from Miss Morris's house. As they stepped into the carriage which had been hired for the occasion, you might have recognised in the bride-elect no other than our old friend Hester, still handsome, but very different from the Hester of earlier days. A look of decision and self-reliance had replaced the expression of trusting timidity which had been the characteristic of her youthful beauty, and a serious earnestness pervaded her countenance. She was about to give her hand—her heart had been his for many a day—to the one honourable man the world contained, according to the idea of her benefactress, Miss Morris—to Dr. Thornton. He was indeed very estimable, and this marriage delighted the heart of the old lady. Frank, too, she prophesied, was to grow up another "only man to be trusted;" so that though his predecessor might be disposed of, the world was not to be left without some one in whom to put faith, when all others were proved unstable.

And where, meanwhile, was the Lady Helen? By a strange coincidence, her marriage was solemnised on the same day as Hester's, though in a far more splendid manner. Hester read of the festivities which had attended the celebration of the nuptials of the lovely Lady Helen Maldon, and prayed fervently for her happiness. She told her husband, tearfully, of the kindness she had received at the hands of Lady Helen, when, friendless and poor, she was making her weary way towards London. The debt in money had been long repaid, she said, but the debt of gratitude she owed could never be obliterated.

George Asleigh, still a wanderer on the face of the earth, had hurried from place to place,

seeking the repose of mind which no change of scene could bring, till, having travelled through Greece and Egypt, he journeyed on to India. He had expected upraidings from his wife, in answer to the letter he had sent her on leaving England, or, at any rate, that she would have drawn the allowance placed at her disposal. Finding neither to be the case, he wrote, at the end of twelve months, to his man of business, requesting that inquiries should be made about a lady with whom he had resided in—shire. The answer he received to this letter was to the effect that she had disappeared, no one knew whither. The writer added that her health had prior to her disappearance, been much impaired, and that in all probability she was since dead, especially as no inquiry had ever been made at the banker's with whom the money left for her maintenance had been placed.

Asleigh's sufferings and remorse were increased fourfold after this. Oh, if the past could be but his once more!—but there was now no remedy, no—none. He could not present himself before his cousin, the woman still so dearly loved, for a dark mystery hung over his wife's fate, and all his efforts to clear it away were baffled. With anxious eye did he search the newspapers, dreading to see the announcement of Lady Helen's marriage, but for very long he was spared this additional pang. At length, when seven years had passed over the head of the self-exiled man, he learned that she had pledged her faith to another.

He could remember her husband, one worthier than he had himself ever been to possess the treasure he had lost.

After passing two years longer in India, the climate began to tell seriously on Asleigh's health, and, little caring where he went, he retraced his steps through Egypt, and over the well-known beaten track through the Continent, until he reached Paris. While idling in that capital during the tenth year of his banishment, tidings reached him of his uncle's death; and business rendering it necessary that he should now return to England, the new earl once more set foot on his native land.

Helen could not avoid an involuntary start as she read that the Earl of Redland had after an absence of some years, arrived in London; but she had tutored herself perfectly. Had she not torn his unworthy image from her heart, with a merciless hand made strong by wounded pride? She could long since have met him anywhere, without her colour deepening a shade or the quickening of her pulse. And now as a wife and mother, she would indeed have scorned herself had it been otherwise.

"I see my cousin Redland has returned," she said in her coldest accents, when she met her husband, Colonel Allenby, at dinner.

"Oh, indeed! I wonder he has not come to see you. I must call on him to-morrow."

"No, if you please, do not: and I should not wish my husband to seek him."

"Surely it is time now, dearest, to forgive and forget," Colonel Allenby remonstrated, half laughing, but the way in which his wife uttered the word "never," ended the conversation. Helen piqued herself on being a good wife, and her husband's devotion to her admitted of no question. If her exhausted heart had been incapable of loving again, still her admiration and respect for the partner she had chosen were most genuine, and enabled her to do her duty towards him cheerfully and well. Allenby remembered—though he had never exchanged a word with his wife on the subject—that the world had once given Lady Helen to her cousin, Lord Redland, and he refrained from any further remark about him, believing he fully understood her reasons for speaking as she had just done.

It was fated that Lord Redland should soon go through the ordeal he had most dreaded, and which he had yet, in a manner, sought—a meeting with his cousin Helen. It was only when her black eyes rested on his care-worn face for an instant, and were withdrawn with an expression on them of cold unforgiving disdain, that he felt how much he had mis-calculated the effect of the influence of old recollections.

He had suffered so much—such dreary years of remorse had been his, that it seemed to him as if she and all the world would have been aware of this, and, instead of stabbing still more deeply, have placed the finger of love and pity on the yet open wounds, and bid them close, and throb no more. He left the ball-room in which they had met, too unnerved to bear society, and wandered through the streets to his lonely home.

How changed was the aspect of all things to the child whose birth Fortune had rung in with golden bells.

He tried first one thing, and then another; still the old failing of instability seemed to haunt him, but now it was not from fickleness of purpose. Want of heart in every pursuit rendered him incapable of performing, as he ought, the duties required of him, and a sense of right, in many instances, made George Asleigh give up what he felt he could do with so little earnestness. Thus the two first years after his return to England, were devoted to politics. On entering the arena, cheered by his friends, and excited for a while by questions which were at that time the interesting topics

of the day, he seemed to have cast aside for ever the apathy they had so deplored, and his talents, varied and brilliant, shone forth and caused the country to reckon him amongst her rising statesmen. But the highest offers were made to him in vain. Sick of public life, where all was empty as the void within his own yearning heart, he determined on burying himself in the country, and seeking there for the peace of mind which had hitherto been denied him.

Worn in mind and body, his health had also given way, and before leaving town, he, at the solicitations of some of his oldest friends, agreed to ask the advice of one of the great medical authorities—none other than Dr. Thornton, now an established man.

Hester's husband had mounted, step by step, the ladder of eminence, and, respected by all who knew him, possessed of a store of this world's goods, and of better hopes beyond, her lot with him was indeed an enviable one. Their union was blessed with three children, of which number, one, a little girl, alone survived; and how Hester loved this dear one, many mothers may tell.

Her son, Frank Benfield, now a fine promising lad of twelve years, was, through the good Doctor's liberality, pursuing his education under a clergyman in the country prior to entering the army, the profession he had chosen, and for which Miss Morris had expressed her intention of fitting him out; for, still as kindly interested in Hester and her son as of yore, their good old friend had settled her little fortune on Frank—'her boy,' as she called him; and thus all was bright and prosperous in and about the house of the once friendless and deserted girl.

Hester was in her dining-room her child by her side dressed for her morning's walk.

"There, darling, go to Nurse," said the fond mother, pressing a kiss on the lips of the little upturned face. "Shall mamma take you to her?" and catching up the child in her arms, she carried her from the room, calling as she went, "Here, Nurse, take your charge."

The nurse was standing without at the hall-door, through which, at the moment, the man servant was admitting a gentleman, by whom ere Hester could escape, she was accosted.

In some little confusion, she begged him to walk in, adding that Dr. Thornton, whom she presumed he came to see, would be disengaged directly; and was in the act of leaving the room, when, with an agitated gesture, he detained her, and in trembling accents, a voice which she now recognised—one she had believed to be long silenced in the grave—called her by name, "Hester, Hester! don't you know me?—am I so changed?" She staggered back, and nearly fainted.

"George Asleigh, do I see you again? After these many years, why have you sought me? Is it to bring more shame on the head of one who never wronged you?"

"You mistake my purpose in coming to this house, Hester, though seeing you has relieved me from a load of misery and remorse. I came to visit Dr. Thornton. How is it that I find you here?"

"I am—I am—his wife!" she almost shrieked; and then, dropping on her knees, clasped her hands, and said in a voice scarce audible, "Oh, for the love of heaven, tell me, George Asleigh, that I was never yours; tell me I was wronged, deceived—anything, but not that I am your wife. My child, my little Mary, think of her."

"The infant I saw in your arms but now?"
"Yes, yes; she is dearer to me than my life. Oh, Asleigh, in mercy tell me it was all they said, false, and that you deceived me."

"I did not deceive you, Hester, as regarded our marriage, nor did I wish to do so subsequently. A letter from me, did not reach you?"

"None—oh none; and God knows how long I sought for and trusted you."

"And now you hate me,—is it not so? I am detestable in your eyes. Listen, Hester, while I explain the past. Accident threw us in each other's way; at the time I met you I was smarting from what I believed to be my rejection by the woman I loved beyond all else on earth. You were beautiful, and the thought seized upon my mind of making you my wife, in the hope of wounding the pride of one who had lacerated mine. I saw you were not indifferent to me, and it was in my power to raise you to a sphere much above that in which you then were. This, perhaps, I looked upon as sufficient compensation for every thing else.—We were scarcely married when news reached me of the dangerous illness of a near relative.—I hurried to what I believed to be his deathbed—the deathbed of her father. There it was my miserable fate to learn that she loved me, and had ever done so; and, like a coward, unable to face the consequences of my own actions, I fled—fled from England: but ere I left, I wrote to you. When after waiting many months, no answer came to my letter, I wrote to England, and directed that inquiry should be made about you. From what I learnt I had reason to believe you were dead. What I suffered from remorse, God alone knows; I thank Him now, that at least I did not cause your death.

"And, George Asleigh, you never loved me