

NARRATIVE OF JOHN WILLIAMS, *One of those persons who were buried alive in the ruins of the Brunswick Theatre.*

Taken down from his Conversation in the Hospital.

In the beginning of last autumn, I was sent to London on some matters of business by my father Mr. Williams, the building surveyor of Chester, who is also known to the literary world by his "Remarks" on some of the architectural antiquities of that city. I carried letters of introduction to Mr. Nash, to Mr. Rickman of the House of Commons, and to another Member of parliament, whose name I do not wish to mention. The last gentleman invited me to his house, overwhelmed me with professions of esteem, and quite turned my head with his offers of services. When the business which had called me to town was finished, I wrote to my father of the new prospects that had been opened to me, and in contempt of his advice and injunctions, determined on remaining in London, to follow out a career so much better adapted to my talents than that of a provincial builder. An open quarrel with my family was the consequence; but I took no trouble to appease their anger, being convinced that a very short time would prove the wisdom of my conduct, and enable me to demand rather than solicit forgiveness.

Two months passed away in expectation: my money was spent, and the people at my lodgings began to abate in their civility, when I thought it was necessary to bring my patron to the point. I called at his house for that purpose, and found him just stepping into a postchaise. He seemed as glad to see me as ever, but, of course, had little time for conversation. When he had fairly seared himself in the vehicle, and, in my despair, I had ventured to ask how long he meant to be absent from town, shaking me cordially by the hand, he informed me that if there was a call of the House, he might be obliged to return in the course of the Session, but that, at all events, he would have the pleasure of seeing me this time next year. I do not remember the carriage driving off—but the passers-by stopping to look at me, as I stood like a statue on the flags, recalled me to myself, and I went home to my lodgings.

I was too timid, or too obstinate, to write to my father. I preferred lowering my expectations, and applying for a clerkship in a builder's office, and was promised the influence of several persons of respectability in order to obtain it. In the meantime, by the advice of an acquaintance, I was induced to apply to the pawnbroker for a temporary pecuniary relief; but this did not enable me to discharge the rent of my lodgings. The civility of my landlady was changed to coldness, and her coldness, by a natural transition, to heat. The persecution I underwent at home made me take refuge in public-houses, where I fell in with companions as desperate as myself, but apparently more happy. I at length left my lodgings secretly, with the remains of my wardrobe under my arm. I engaged a bed by the night at what is called a theatrical house, but one of the lowest of the sort, where I first acquired a taste—or rather a passion—for stage amusements, and became acquainted, by the introduction of her brother, with a young actress, whose name, whether she is dead or alive, will not be benefited by an association with mine. My appearance at this time, with regard to dress, was respectable, and my manners probably intimated an acquaintance with better society than that enjoyed by my companions. The reception I met with from the lady was favourable; and, young, beautiful, amiable, and, I am convinced, innocent, she made an impression on my heart which is the only part of my London history I am not ashamed of acknowledging.

I debated with myself whether, on finding a situation, I should not remove her from a mode of life at least dangerous, if not disgraceful, by making her my wife, or, by attaching myself to her profession, serve as a protector from its danger, and derive from it the means of mutual subsistence. My debate, however, was speedily cut short: no situation turned up; I was pursued by means of summonses for several small debts; my landlord refused me even a night's lodging without the money in advance, and I was compelled to make my retreat to another quarter of the town. It would be disgusting to pursue, step by step, the path of my decline, which was now fearfully precipitous. From the parlour I sunk to the tap room—from the society of masters to that of journeymen—from the shabby surtout to the tattered jacket. My place of refuge was in Barlow-court, a narrow lane in the neighbourhood of Wells-street, and having some slight knowledge of the upholstery and cabinet making business, I received employment accidentally in fitting up the Brunswick Theatre.

My earnings were very small, but I contrived to cheat

my hunger out of sufficient to enable me to drown, almost every night, in intoxication, the sense of my degradation and despair.

The theatre was at length opened, although the internal work was not all finished. I was in attendance at the fatal rehearsal of the 28th of February, in the course of my duty. As I was passing across the stage, I was arrested by the voice of a new actress—a voice that had lingered in my ear in spite of everything. The earnestness of my gaze was observed by one of my fellow-workmen, who informed me the lady whom I seemed to admire so much was Mrs. ———. Mrs. ———! She was married! I forgot at the moment my situation, my dress, the proprieties of time and place, and I rushed forward to demand from her own lips a confirmation or denial of the truth of what I had heard. That motion saved my life. There was heard at the instant a sound which I cannot describe by crash, or roar, or any other imitative word in language; it was not loud—nor shrill—nor hollow: perhaps its associations in my memory with what followed may have fixed its peculiar character in my mind—but I can only describe it to the imagination by likening it to one's conception of the harsh, grating, sullen, yet abrupt noise of the gravestone when it shall be suddenly raised from its sandy, clammy bed, at the sounding of the last trumpet. One of the actors rushed across the stage, and darted out by the side-door. Of the rest, those who were speaking, stopped in the middle of the word: the hand raised in passion was not dropped; the moving crowd of human beings stood still, as if by one impulse;—there was a pause of two or three seconds. Some, whose mind was more present, raised their eyes to the roof; but the rest were motionless, even in the vagrant organs of vision, and stood mute and still like a gallery of statues. I cannot attempt to describe the sound which awoke the scene from this appearance of death, only to give it the reality. I would liken it to thunder, if you could mingle the idea of the explosion with that of its effects—or to the rush of a mighty torrent, if you could fancy amalgamated, as it were, in its roar, the typical voices of pain, and horror, and confusion, and struggling, and death. I staggered back, and nearly fell into an abyss that was cloven into the floor by a fragment of the iron roof on the very spot where I had stood but a moment before. While rushing up the side of the newly-formed precipice to regain my footing, by the single terrific glance I had time and light to cast behind, I saw that the iron and wood were wet with blood and brains and the other horrible mysteries of a man's inner body, and that the "living soul" I had just talked to was not to be recognized by the sight as ever having borne the external characteristics of a human being.

The light was suddenly shut out—and yet so slowly as to inflict upon my sight that which will ever stand between it and the sun. Fragment after fragment rushed furiously from the roof, but yet so thickly intermingled that I cannot at this moment say whether or not the mass of the roof was disunited at all in its descent. Then the bursting of the walls—the grating of the stones and bricks as they were ground into powder—the rending of the planks and wooden partitions—the hissing of the lamps and brass-work—the damp crush of human bodies—and the yells of mortal agony from a hundred hearts, which seemed wilder and stronger even than the inanimate sounds that had called them into being—to choke, conquer, and silence them forever.

All was dark. A weight was upon my shoulder which an Atlas could not have moved; my left leg was fixed between two planks, and, as I discovered by feeling with my hand before the pain announced it, it was broken and distorted; the side outline of the narrow chamber in which I sat would have nearly described a rightangled triangle, the hypotenuse leaning on my back; above, I could extend my arm at full length without an obstacle, but the aperture could not have admitted anything thicker than the arm; before me was a wall apparently of solid iron, and below, and at the sides, the surface, consisting of iron, brick, stones, and wood, was broken into narrow interstices.

When the united sounds I have described had subsided into a distant hum, a single voice rose upon my ear: it was the voice of the lady mentioned above; it was one wild, shrill, unbroken scream. I do not know how long it lasted; I do not even know whether it was a human voice at all; it did not stop for breath; its way was not impeded like that of the rest by the intervention of the ruins; minute after minute it continued, and every minute it became wilder and shriller, piercing, like an arrow, through my head and heart, till my tortured senses found temporary relief in insensibility.

My fainting-fit probably lasted a considerable time; for when I recovered, it was long before I could understand

my situation, or recall any thing that had happened to my memory. At length, piece by piece, the truth came before me, and I could feel the cold sweat trickling down my brow. The voice I had heard existed probably only in imagination, for it was now silent. A low deep sound was humming in my ears, which I could at length distinguish to be the simultaneous groans of human beings, separated from me either by distance or some thick and deadening barrier. My ear endeavoured in vain to divide it into its component parts, and to recognize the voices of those I knew; and there was something more horrible in this vague mysterious monotony than if it had been distinctly fraught with the dying accents of the one I loved best on earth. I felt as if my lot must be bitterer than that of the rest. I was alone—I was cut off even from communion of suffering; while they, I imagined, were together, and in the sound of one another's voices, and the touch, even, of one another's clothes, received some relief from the idea of total abandonment, of agony unimagined, and unshared.

My senses, I believe, began to totter, for I complained aloud of my lonely fate: I knew that I was behaving absurdly, but I could not help it; I beat the iron walls of my dungeon with my clenched hands till they were wet with blood, and shrieked aloud with a voice rendered terrific by the fury of despair. The voices of the rest appeared to be startled into silence at the sound—or perhaps it fell upon their ears like a cry of comfort and hope, an answer to their groans from the surface of the earth. After a pause I heard another dull, heavy sound, like that produced by a muffled drum: it was, in reality, a drum, and probably beat by one of the band, as a more powerful means of awakening attention than his own voice. The sound, in such circumstances, was inexpressibly awful; and when the hand that smote the instrument in so unaccustomed a scene, wandered by habit into a regular tone, my sensations were exaggerated into a species of horror which I can liken only to that which might be supposed to visit a religious mind on witnessing some shocking and blasphemous impiety.

It may seem a species of insanity to mention it; but when the roll of the drum, and the sound of human voices, had ceased, and after I had been left for a considerable time, as it were, to myself, even in these circumstances of terror, and loneliness, and mystery, I possessed a species of knowledge, which the denizens of the surface would have deemed equally useless and unattainable to those underground;—I knew the hour of the night. Like the idiot who mimicked, at the proper intervals, the audible measurement of time, after the clock was removed which had taught him the practice, my inclination for drinking, which had been converted by habit into an unconquerable passion, returned at the accustomed time of its gratification. In spite of surrounding circumstances, I fancied myself in the midst of my dissolute companions, in the scene of our coarse and vulgar revels; I drank without being filled; I became drunken with imagination; and the close and poisonous atmosphere, which before had been burdened with my groans, now rung with songs and laughter, and imprecations. This state of unnatural excitement passed away, but the reaction which took place exhibited all the symptoms that attend the awakening of the young and inexperienced drunkard. With head-ache, sickness, faintness, fear, foreboding, repentance,—I awoke in "an horror of great darkness."

Then the ideas, wholesome in themselves, but which, in such circumstances, are felt like daggers, crowded round my burthened and weary heart. My father—my family—my arrogance—my ingratitude—my dishonesty—my mispent time—my forgotten duties—my blasphemy and unregarded God! I buried my face in my hands, but I could not hide them from my soul. Slowly and sternly they passed before me; but the last idea swallowed up its precursors; and with a start and shudder, I found myself trembling on the verge of eternity—on the very steps of the judgment seat, entering into the presence of the awful and eternal Judge.

It will be esteemed an example of the Pathos when I mention next my hunger and thirst, and say that these passions of the perishing body almost neutralized the above sentiments of my immortal soul. Hunger, indeed, may be borne, at least to the extent it was my lot to endure it; but thirst is truly a chastisement "of scorpions."

I have not described my feelings; I have simply catalogued, and in a very incomplete manner, their proximate causes. I sunk by degrees into a sort of stupor, from which I was awakened by the light of heaven streaming full in my face, through an aperture made in the ruins by my deliverers. The apparent apathy, or, as some term it,