

Miscellaneous.

THE FIRST AND THE LAST DINNER.

[In the well wrought and highly interesting composition that we here condense, a correspondent of *Maga* gives us a valuable and striking moral lesson. Thousands who might pass heedlessly over a sober essay designed to inculcate the same reflections, will have them irresistibly impressed on their minds by such a picture as is here spread before them. Its most affecting displays, and darkest shades, may all be found in the realities of life.]—*Atlas*.

Twelve friends, much about the same age, and fixed, by their pursuits, their family connections, and other local interests, as permanent inhabitants of the metropolis, agreed, one day when they were drinking their wine at the Star and Garter at Richmond, to institute an annual dinner among themselves, under the following regulations: That they should dine alternately at each other's houses on the first and last day of the year; that the first bottle of wine uncorked at the first dinner, should be re-corked and put away, to be drunk by him who should be the last of their number; that they should never admit a new member; that when one died, eleven should meet, and when another died, ten should meet, and so on; and that when only one remained, he should on these two days, dine by himself, and sit the usual hours at his solitary table; but the first time he so dined alone, lest it should be the only one, he should then uncork the first bottle, and in the first glass, drink to the memory of all those who were gone.

There was something original and whimsical in the idea, and it was eagerly embraced. They were all in the prime of life, closely attached by reciprocal friendship, fond of social enjoyments, and looked forward to their future meetings with unalloyed anticipations of pleasure. The only thought, indeed, that could have darkened those anticipations, was one not very likely to intrude itself at this moment, that of the hapless wight who was destined to uncork the first bottle at his lonely repast.

It was high summer when this frolic compact was entered into; and as their pleasure-yacht skimmed along the dark bosom of the Thames, on their return to London, they talked of nothing but their first and last feasts of ensuing years. Their imaginations ran riot with a thousand gay predictions of festive merriment. They wanted in conjectures of what changes time would operate; joked each other upon their appearance, when they should meet,—some hebling upon crutches after a severe fit of the gout,—others poking about with purblind eyes, which even spectacles could hardly enable to distinguish the alderman's walk in a haunch of venison—some with pertly round bellies and tidy little brown wigs, and others decently dressed out in a new suit of mourning for the death of a great-grand daughter or a great-great-grand-son.

"As for you, George," exclaimed one of the twelve, addressing his brother-in-law, "I expect I shall see you as dry, withered, and unshaken, as an old eel-skin, you more outside of a man!" and he accompanied the words with a hearty slap on the shoulder.

George Fortescue was leaning carelessly over the side of the yacht, laughing the loudest of any at the conversation which had been carried on. The sudden manual salutation of his brother-in-law threw him off his balance, and in a moment he was overboard. They heard the heavy splash of his fall, before they could be said to have seen him fall. The yacht was proceeding swiftly along; but it was instantly stopped.

The utmost consternation now prevailed. It was nearly dark, but Fortescue was known to be an excellent swimmer and startling as the accident was, they felt certain he would regain the vessel. They could not see him. They listened. They heard the sound of his hands and feet. They hailed him. An answer was returned, but in a faint gurgling voice, and the exclamation "Oh God!" struck upon their ears. In an instant two or three, who were expert swimmers plunged into the river, and swam towards the spot, whence the exclamation had proceeded. One of them was within an arm's length of Fortescue; he saw him; he was struggling and buffeting the water; before he could be reached he went down, and his distracted friend beheld the eddying circles of the wave just over the spot where he had sunk. He dived after him, and touched the bottom; but the tide must have drifted the body onwards, for it could not be found!

They proceeded to one of the nearest stations where drags were kept, and having procured the necessary apparatus, they returned to the fatal spot. After the lapse of above an hour, they succeeded in raising the lifeless body of their lost friend. All the usual remedies were employed for restoring suspended animation, but in vain; and they now pursued the remainder of their course to London, in mournful silence, with the corpse of him who had commenced the day of pleasure with them in the fulness of health, of spirits and of life! Amid their severe grief, they could not but reflect how soon one of the joyous twelve had slipped out of the little festive circle.

The months rolled on, and cold December came with all its cheering round of kindly greetings and merry hospitalities; and with it came a softened recollection of the fate of poor Fortescue; eleven of the twelve assembled on the last day of the year, and it was impossible not to feel their loss as they sat down to dinner. The very irregularity of the table, five on one side, and only four on the other, forced the melancholy event upon their memory.

There are few sorrows so stubborn as to resist the united influence of wine, a circle of select friends, and a season of prescriptive gaiety.

A decorous sigh or two, a few becoming ejaculations,

and an instructive observation upon the uncertainty of life, made up the sum of tender posthumous "offerings to the mane of poor George Fortescue," as they proceeded to discharge the more important duties for which they had met. By the time the third glass of champagne had gone round, in addition to sundry potations of fine old hock, and "capital madeira," they had ceased to discover any thing so very pathetic in the inequality of the two sides of the table, or so melancholy in their crippled number of eleven.

[The rest of the evening passed off very pleasantly in conversation, good humored enjoyment and conviviality, and it was not till towards twelve o'clock that "poor George Fortescue" was again remembered.]

They all agreed, at parting, however, that they had never passed such a happy day, congratulated each other upon having instituted so delightful a meeting, and promised to be punctual to their appointment the ensuing evening, when they were to celebrate the new year, whose entrance they had welcomed in bumpers of claret, as the watchman bawled, "past twelve!" beneath the window.

They met accordingly; and their gaiety was without any alloy or drawback. It was only the first time of their assembling after the death of "poor George Fortescue," that made the recollection of it painful; for, though but a few hours had intervened, they now took their seats at the table as if eleven had been their original number, and as if all were there that had been ever expected to be there.

It is thus in every thing. The first time a man enters a prison—the first book an author writes—the first painting an artist executes—the first battle a general wins—say, the first time a rogue is hanged, (for a rotten rope may provide a second performance, even of that ceremony, with all its singleness of character,) differ inescapably from their first repetition. There is a charm, a spell, a novelty, a freshness, a delight, inseparable from the first experience, (hanging, always excepted, be it remembered,) which no art or circumstance can impart to the second. And it is the same in all the darker traits of life. There is a degree of poignancy and anguish in the first assaults of sorrow, which is never found afterwards. In every case, it is simply that the first fine edge of our feelings has been taken off, and that it can never be restored.

Several years had elapsed, and our eleven friends kept up their double anniversaries, as they might aptly enough be called, with scarcely any perceptible change. But alas! there came one dinner at last, which was darkened by a calamity they never expected to witness, for on that very day, their friend, companion, brother almost, was hanged! Yes! Stephen Rowland, the wit, the oracle, the life of their little circle, had, on the morning of that day, forfeited his life upon a public scaffold, for having made one single stroke of his pen in a wrong place. In other words, a bill of exchange which passed into his hands for £700, passed out of it for £1700; he having drawn the important little prefix to the hundreds, and the bill being paid at the banker's without examining the words of it. The forgery was discovered—brought home to Rowland,—and though the greatest interest was used to obtain a remission of the fatal penalty, poor Stephen Rowland was hanged. Every body pitied him; and nobody could tell why he did it. He was not poor, he was not a gambler, he was not a speculator, but phrenology settled it. The organ of *acquisitiveness* was discovered in his head, after his execution, as large as a pigeon's egg. He could not help it.

It would be injustice to the ten to say, that even wine, friendship, and a merry season, could dispel the gloom which pervaded this dinner. It was agreed beforehand, that they should not allude to the distressing and melancholy theme; and having thus interdicted the only thing which really occupied all their thoughts, the natural consequence was that silent contemplation took the place of dismal discourse; and they separated long before midnight.

Some fifteen years had now glided away since the fate of poor Rowland, and the ten remained; but the stealing hand of time had written sundry changes in most legible characters. Raven locks had become grizzled—two or three heads had not as many locks altogether as may be reckoned in a walk of half a mile along the Regent's Canal—one was actually covered with a brown wig—the crow's feet were visible in the corner of the eye—good old port and warm madeira carried it against hock, claret, red burgundy, and champagne—stews, hashes, and ragouts, grew into favour—crusts were rarely called for to relish the cheese after dinner—conversation was less boisterous, and it turned chiefly upon politics and the state of the funds, or the value of landed property—apologies were made for coming in thick shoes and warm stockings—the doors and windows were more carefully provided with list and sand-bags—the fire more in request—and a quiet game of whist filled up the hours that were wont to be devoted to drinking, singing, and riotous merriment. Two rubbers, a cup of coffee, and at home by eleven o'clock, was the usual cry, when the fifth or sixth glass had gone round after the removal of the cloth. At parting, too, there was now a long ceremony in the hall, buttoning up great-coats, tying on wollen-comforters, fixing silk handkerchiefs over the mouth and up to the ears, and grasping sturdy walking-canes to support unsteady feet.

Their fiftieth anniversary came, and death had been busy. One had been killed by the overturning of the mail, in which he had taken his place in order to be present at the dinner, having purchased an estate in Monmouthshire, and retired thither with his family. Another had undergone the terrific operation for the stone, and expired beneath the knife—a third had yielded up a broken spirit two years after the loss of an only surviving and beloved daughter.—a fourth was carried off in a few days by a *cholera morbus*—a fifth had breathed his last the very morning he obtained a judgment in his favour by the Lord Chancellor, which had cost him his last shilling nearly to get, and which, after a litigation of eighteen years, declared him the rightful possessor of ten thousand a-year,—ten minutes afterwards he was no more. A sixth had perished by the hand of a midnight assassin, who

broke into his house for plunder, and sacrificed the owner of it, as he grasped convulsively a bundle of Exchequer bills, which the robber was drawing from beneath his pillow, where he knew they were every night placed for better security.

Four little old men, of withered appearance and decrepit walk, with cracked voices, and dim, rayless eyes, sat down, by the mercy of heaven, (as they themselves tremulously declared,) to celebrate for the fiftieth time, the first day of the year; to observe the frolic compact, which, half a century before, they had entered into at the Star and Garter at Richmond! Eight where in their graves! Yet they chirped cheerily over their glass, though they could scarcely carry it to their lips, if more than half full; and cracked their jokes though they articulated their words with difficulty, and heard each other with difficulty. They mumbled, they chattered, they laughed, (if a sort of strangled wheezing might be called a laugh;) and when the wines sent their icy blood in warmer pulse through their veins, they talked of their past as if it were but a yesterday that had slipped by them—and of their future, as if it were a busy century that lay before them.

They were just the number of the quiet rubber of whist; and for three successive years they sat down to one. The fourth came, and then their rubber was played with an open dummy; a fifth and whist was no longer practicable; two could only play at cribbage, and cribbage was the game. But it was little more than the mockery of play. Their palsied hands could hardly hold, or their fading sight distinguish the cards, while their torpid faculties made them doze between each deal.

At length came the last dinner; and the survivor of the twelve, upon whose head fourscore and ten winters had showered their snows, ate his solitary meal. It so chanced that it was in his house, and at his table, they had celebrated the first. In his cellar, too, had remained for eight and fifty years, the bottle they had then uncorked, re-corked, and which he was that day to uncork again. It stood beside him. With a feeble and reluctant grasp he took the "frail memorial" of a youthful vow: and for a moment memory was faithful to her office. She threw open the long vista of buried years; and his heart travelled through them all: Their lusty and blithesome spring,—their bright and fervid summer,—their ripe and temperate autumn,—their chill, but not too frozen winter. He saw, as in a mirror, how, one by one, the laughing companions of that merry hour at Richmond, had dropped into eternity. He felt all the loneliness of his condition, (for he had eschewed marriage, and in the veins of no living creature ran a drop of blood whose source was in his own;) and as he drained the glass which he had filled "to the memory of those who were gone," the tears slowly trickled down the deep furrows of his aged face.

He had thus fulfilled one part of his vow, and he prepared himself to discharge the other, by sitting the usual number of hours at his desolate table. With a heavy heart he resigned himself to the gloom of his own thoughts—a lethargic sleep stole over him—his head fell upon his bosom—confused images crowded into his mind—he babbled to himself—was silent—and when his servant entered the room, alarmed by a noise which he heard, he found his master stretched on the carpet at the foot of the easy chair, out of which he had slipped in an apoplectic fit. He never spoke again, nor once opened his eyes though the vital spark was not extinct till the following day. And this was the last dinner!

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