

THE EXECUTIONER OF PARIS.

NOTHING of the sublimity of horror is associated in the mind of an Englishman with the mention of "Jack Ketch;" we even denote him by a pleasant *soubriquet*: we feel no convulsive shudder when we hear of his whereabouts; we do not cross over the way when we meet him in Fleet street. We regard him, with the exception of the vice of drunkenness—some trifling brutality of manner—a rather too prominent expression of contempt for the refinements of society, "taste, Shakspeare, and the musical glasses," as a mighty respectable professor—in his way. Perhaps the familiarity which our laws permit between him and the public, may have detracted from all that should have been imposing or impressive about him. But "*l'exécuteur des hautes œuvres*" is regarded in France in a far different and more formidable light. Although a resident in the centre of the French capital, he is never seen by in the public performance of his dreadful duty:—a degree of cautious and not impolitic mystery is attached to him; and such are the feelings his very name excites, that the mere announcement of his presence, in the common walks of life, would render the very Boulevards sacred to himself alone; would disperse the myriads of barricaders in the noontide of their patriotic travail;—would calm the tremendous clamours of the Chamber of Deputies, and prorogue or dissolve it without the solemnity of proclamation. Should he deign to usher in the Duc de Bourdeaux, he might clear a way for him to the Tuilleries and the throne, without dread of competition or resistance. The mandates of the *Procureur-generale* himself, which summon him to his duty, are deposited in a *bouche de fer*, inserted in the large and massive iron grating that guards the entrance to his dwelling; for perhaps not one could be found, daring and reckless enough of public opinion, to consign them in person to their terrible address.—He reads and obeys. In the darkness and depth of night, with his assistants, he arranges the materials of death: no word is spoken as he labours in his awful calling; the feeble light which enables him to prepare the machinery, glimmering on the scaffold, renders the guards that surround it barely discernible: while they, motionless and dumb, seem rather phantoms of the night than breathing men. If allowed to trace such an official to the solitude of his shunned domicile—to see him seated, Crusoe-like, beside his hearth, and to consider the economy of his unprofessional hours—something might be learned of good or ill which might point a moral, if it would not adorn a tale. To him it has been given to know the last words, looks, and actions of many, unobscured by affectation or deceit;—the secret affections of numbers, long concealed from the world's view, have been laid open, once and briefly, yet prominently, to his sight. He has witnessed the eloquence of remorse or of innocence, at the hour of death, when the retrospect of a lengthened life of sin or misfortune has been comprehended, perhaps, in one last sentence, one parting word or look, more emphatic than all that "saint or sophist ever writ."

Grave reflections these; but they were passing through my mind as I rung at the bell of a small neat house in the *Rue des Marais du Temple*; the door being opened, I was ushered into a low well-furnished room, wherein a man, of the age of sixty, was employed touching the keys of a piano with his right hand, while his left arm embraced a child about ten years old, of remarkable beauty, whose features strongly resembled those of him who held her. The old man was Henri Sanson, the public executioner of Paris! Having previously adapted my address to one whom I

had imaged in my mind as bearing in his traits the repulsive record of his trade, I had to re-order my ideas, and assume a different manner. For, as I contemplated his mild and open countenance, in which manly beauty was not wanting, I felt myself bound to acknowledge, by a corresponding courtesy of demeanour, the salutations of a man of the world, wholly free from embarrassment or affectation. The intention of composing a treatise on the various public punishments adopted at different epochs of French legislation, was offered by me as an apology for the unaccustomed intrusion to which he was subjected. He politely acceded to my request for information, and conducted me to a chamber containing a large and well-selected library. Here, all the awkwardness I had previously felt, as to discourse with the singular being who stood before me, was at once dismissed; and the titles of the various volumes which I examined soon led to free conversation, during which my host displayed great taste and judgment in his observations on the various works I brought under his notice: expressing himself as one would do, who had profited largely what he had read. It was clear that his books formed his chief society: abandoned by the world, he can here hold converse with the illustrious dead, and can render himself familiar with the sentiments of the good and great, of the present or a past age, without dread of the expression of that scorn, disgust, and horror that would attend any attempt at personal communication with his fellow men; Sanson loves to talk, and talks exceedingly well; but, in the whole course of a visit of two hours, which was prolonged by the interest excited in me by this extraordinary person, he forgot not for a moment the distance placed between him and society in general: he showed that he was fully aware of his situation, and does not affect to despise the feeling it is calculated to produce in others; but, having made up his mind to sustain it, calls up all his philosophy (for it may well be termed so) to support him in an existence without the pale of social intercourse. Among his books my eye fell on "*Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné*."

Reverting, however, to the professed object of my visit, he unlocked the door of another chamber, in which the various instruments of extreme punishment formerly used, are yet preserved by him. It is, truly, a fearful museum: and the examination of its contents gave rise to many inquiries on my part, which led to many curious anecdotes which he recounted, particularly as to the last moments of the condemned. I could not but feel the contrast, of the office of the man with the sensibility he displayed in his narration, and the humanity which he evinced as he adverted to the dreadful circumstances in which he had borne so prominent a part. It is unnecessary to quote them; but all he related of the sufferers in the hour of death, had something singularly forced, unnatural, and painful. *Castaing* was believed generally to be innocent of the crime for which he was condemned, yet, as Sanson told me, he confessed his guilt upon the scaffold. He showed me the sabre with which the Marquis de Lally had been beheaded. It was prepared for the occasion, and three were cast before one could be found likely to answer the purpose. It was usual at that period for young men of fashion to *assist** (as the term

* This extraordinary taste was much indulged in at the time. The celebrated George Selwyn travelled from London to Paris, day and night, to be present at the execution of Damiens. He was repulsed, at first, by the guards who surrounded the scaffold, until he

is) on the scaffold at the last hour of the condemned, as they did on the stage at theatrical performances. The crowd upon that occasion was great, and the space limited, the arm of the executioner was jostled at the moment the sabre was balanced above his head, the blow was diverted from the neck of the unhappy victim, and a common cutlass was resorted to, by one of the executioner's assistants, to end the agonies of the sufferer. A notch in the blade of the sabre is exactly of the size and in the form of a human tooth.

I have said that Sanson, during the conversation, gave proofs of no ordinary humanity. He summons up his resolution to the dreadful task he has to perform, and his firmness fails him not at the moment of duty. Yet, as soon as he receives the fatal order of the *Procureur-generale*, he has always a visible and violent struggle with his feelings, ere he brings himself to obey. He at length proceeds to prepare, with apparent coolness, the machine of destruction, and all the apparatus of death, but as soon as his sad work is finished, his countenance becomes pale and death-like—he returns to his solitary home and skuts himself in

stated that he had come from London expressly to witness the ceremony. "Make room for the gentleman, he is an Englishman and an amateur," was the bitter observation of a gen-d'arme as he civilly made way for the stranger.

his chamber, where he long refuses nourishment or conversation, and tears start from his eyes when induced to advert to the circumstances of an execution.

The man had impressed me with feelings decidedly distinct from those which I anticipated as the result of my communication with him, and as I took leave of him (I know not whether from forgetfulness or otherwise) I held out my hand. His countenance suddenly changed as he drew back several steps from me; it expressed astonishment and confusion—all his ease of manner had fled at once, and I was again reminded of "*la Main Sanglante!*"

To save the subject of this paper from a charge of vulgarity, by the world in general, let it be remembered that, during the Irish rebellion, a gentleman of name, family, and fortune, and the high sheriff of a county, had, if I recollect, the thanks of both houses of Parliament voted to him for acting as executioner, when no other could be found, to a formidable criminal; that, in the year 1790, on the proposition of Maton Delavarenne, seconded by Mirabeau himself, it was especially decreed by the French legislature, that the public executioner should be comprehended in the number of citizens, and that, formerly, in the state of Wurtemberg, after having exercised his profession a certain number of years, the headsman was honoured, by having conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Laws.

JUST FIFTEEN.

BY O. W. W.

In the freshness of morning and spring-time of youth,
The heart is affection, the spirit all truth;
The calm open brow is unshaded by care,
And a light, like the soft light of pleasure, is there.
Each thought of her soul is in innocence dress'd,
Her smile turns the sweetest on those she loves best;
The dark hair lies parted, uncurl'd, on her brow,
And her cheek hath the freshness of health's sunny glow.

The tones of her voice are unguarded and sweet,
Her form the most graceful, her step the most fleet.
Like a bird she is singing some musical strain,
You hear a gay laugh by the flower-covered plain,
The roses are missed from your summer parterre,
And you know the light foot of the maid hath been there.

She wanders with Carlo, or sits in her bower,
Now viewing a landscape, now plucking a flower;
And when 'tis enwreath'd in a fanciful twine,
She bears it to brother, and whispers—'tis thine.
Her mind is just tinged with one shade of romance,
And though first in the circle and first in the dance,
She seeks the broad oak or the grove with delight,
To look on the stars as they flash through the night.
If she thinks of the future, how joyous it seems!
Lit up with the magic of youth's sunny dreams;
She fancies no cloud o'er its surface can lie,
No shadow may darken the blue of its sky—
That life is a garden, where the wanderer can meet,
When one flower hath perish'd, another more sweet.
Her heart is affection; a smile or a tear,
If you praise, or reprove her, will ever appear;
And so she but fancies you altered—her strain
Will cease, till she fancies you love her again.
I have said she admired o'er the green turf to stray,
To gather a wild flower, or dance with the gay—
But although like a bird, ever joyous and wild,
She feels that she cannot be always a child;
So turns to her music, her drawing and book:
She sits, you observe, in that still quiet nook—
I have run o'er my sketch as she studied alone,
And now—look how lightly the fair one hath flown.

NIGHT ON THE GANGES.

BY MISS EMMA ROBERTS.

How calm, how lovely is the soft repose
Of nature, sleeping in a summer night;
How sweet, how lulling the current flows
Beneath the stream of melted chrysolite,
Where the broad Ganges spreads, reflecting o'er
Its silvery surface, with those countless stars,
The ingot gems of heaven's cerulean floor,
Mosques, groves, and cliffs, and pinnacled minars.

The air is fresh, and yet the evening breeze
Has died away—so hush'd, 'tis scarcely heard
To breathe amid the clustering lemon trees,
Whose snowy blossoms, by its faint sighs stirr'd,
Give out their perfume—and the bulbul's notes
Awake the echoes of the balmy clime,
While from yon marble-dome pagoda floats
The music of its bells' soft silvery chime.

Mildly, yet with resplendent beauty, shines
The scene around; although the stars alone
From the bright treasures of their gleaming mines,
A tender radiance o'er the earth have thrown.
Oh! far more lovely are those gentle rays,
With their calm lustre, than the fiery beam
The sun pours down in his meridian blaze,
Lighting with diamond pomp the dazzling stream.

No tint is lost amid those mantling leaves:
There, smiles the glossy peepul—the bamboo
Its bright and vivid colouring receives,
And the broad plantain keeps its tender hue.
Beneath the towering mosque and graceful mhut,
The humble dwelling of the forest glade,
Peeps forth the lowly native's straw-thatched hut,
Reveal'd beside the green hill's deepest shade.

With snowy vases crown'd, the lily springs
In queen-like beauty by the river's brink;
And o'er the wave the bright-leaved lotus flings
Its roseate flowers in many a knotted link.
Oh! when the sultry sun has sunk to rest,
When evening's soft and tender shadows rise,
How sweet the scene upon the river's breast,
Lit by the star-lights of these tropic skies.