

THE DEAD MAN'S RACE,

A CHRISTMAS STORY.

BY W. JERDAN.

"What is Christmas without a snow-storm?"

SOME years ago a happy party were assembled at the hospitable mansion of a "fine old English gentleman," keeping their Christmas holiday, as it should be kept, round a huge Yule log, with wine and wassail, and jest and song; and good humour beamed on every face. Their cheer had been of the best; and fun and frolic had kept their spirits at high thermometer pitch in spite of the cold without: the glass got up in defiance of all weather.

Game succeeded game, — hunt the slipper, — cross-purposes (the only cross of the entertainment), — snap-dragon, — blindman's-buff, — forfeits, — till all were abandoned through pure fatigue, and they again took their seats for a respite, observing grade and station, — master, visitors, family, and servants, — round the great hall-table, when story-telling became the order of the evening.

Night was drawing on, and the hall was lighted only by the blaze of the heaped wood fire, which sparkled and crackled as if rejoicing at the merry faces around it and partaking in the jollity. It seemed to say, *how comfortable do I make you all!* — and so it did; for a heavy snow-storm was raging on the outside as if to cause its value to be more highly appreciated within.

The host — old Marmaduke Walton, surnamed "The Squire" — not only by the peasantry on his estate, but by all the country round — was ensconced in his easy-chair at the head of the ancient oak-board; and a prodigious bowl of bishop was smoking before him, out of which he laddled the generous liquor into horn goblets, in capacity emulous of tankards, for the joyous throng ranging at each side. This duty done, and the toast of the season given, he sang a stave by way of example, and lustily called for tale or song, or something for the general amusement, all round in succession; hinting at salt and water for defaulters to the festive contribution. What with the wish to please, and the fear to offend, one followed another without interruption in the prescribed task.

We have noticed that it was the "gloaming," the indescribable space of time before the bringing of lights; the time when ghosts and goblins, and serious ideas always run in the head (especially if merry-making), and the fall of snow did not tend to repress such notions on the present occasion. It was under such circumstances and feelings that our host told his story — a story of wonder and dread. Listen.

THE DEAD MAN'S RACE.

In the early part of March, Anno Domini 16—, a wealthy farmer was wending his way upon his jaded horse over a wild moor where not a tree grew, and the very soil was so poor, that even the worms died on it. Here and there a solitary bird might be seen pecking at a piece of withered fern, which it quickly left and flew away, surely

to seek some more productive solitude. The sun had set behind the dreary swamp which stretched towards the west, yet still the farmer journeyed on in the hope of reaching his home soon after the midnight hour. He had been at a large cattle fair, where he was unsuccessful in his speculations, and had drunk too freely in order to solace his vexation. A worthy thief (for even so long ago there were thieves at fairs and markets) observing his condition, had robbed him before quitting the town; but with matchless humanity, more than belongs to thieves in these degenerate days, had left him enough of cash to carry him home, the sum, nevertheless, being in copper and wondrous small, and, as it happened, in his great-coat pocket. Thus harassed in mind and body, he had started alone on his path, and was now in the midst of this lonely moor, where no house nor living creature (except the birds I have told you of) were seen to lighten the dreariness of his solitary ride. He had gone too far to return, and in very heaviness of heart he still went on.

The darkness rapidly increased, and the poor traveller, wearied with his laborious course, could hardly discern how to pick his way along little more than a summer sheep-track, worn by winter and obliterated by disuse; or the chance route of unfrequent pedestrians, with a savage waste upon every side. He became dreadfully excited, and urged his tired beast by whip and spur to its utmost speed. This lasted some time, when his eager eyes were blessed with the sight of a hut at a short distance, the door of which he quickly reached, and loudly rapped with the butt of his riding-whip. He rapped again and again, but still no answer was returned:—he rapped again and again, but still no voice replied. Impatiently he lifted the latch and entered without a bidding. It was so dark that he could not distinguish objects, and fire nor light were there to help him. Yet it seemed to be a place of desolation. He felt around the bare walls, and nothing met his grasp. He groped his airy way towards the centre, and all was blank and unfurnished. At last he stumbled over something: he thought it was a truckle bed or some chest of clothes cast down upon the chilly ground. At this moment the moon, long hidden by the gloomy clouds, rose suddenly from behind her murky veil, and, glimmering through the broken roof, a ray fell on the countenance of a Dead Man lying in a common poorhouse coffin, the lid of which lay by its side upon the floor. This corpse was the only tenant of the dismal hut; that coffin its only furniture.

With a single glance at its livid face the farmer rushed out, seized his horse's mane, leapt upon his back, and in an instant was galloping away, as if riding for his soul at Doncaster or Newmarket. Alack! he galloped in vain. In the midst of the clattering of his horse's hoofs, he heard the sound as of wheels rolling close behind him. He paused, and darted a glance round, hoping against hope that relief might be nearer than he dared to think. What horror! he saw the Dead Man's coffin rattling in his rear, apparently mounted on wheels and urged on by some demon of hell. A cold and deathlike sweat broke out on his body and limbs,—his hat was wet with the moisture of his brow, yet his temples burned like fire: in vain he tried to quicken his pace; his blood curdled, and he heard the fiend laughing at his misery.

If he, in utter despair, went slow, the mounted coffin went slow;

if he stumbled over any obstacle, the fiend stumbled too. At last human nature could endure no more. He stopped—he stopped, and the Dead Man's carriage rattled up to his side. Again he started off in agony as fast as his steed could go; but still the coffin kept its course, going with him whithersoever he went. He madly turned towards it, and the moonbeam still glimmered on the face of its unearthly occupant. This was too much; and he fell senseless from his horse.

Next morning he was found by some labourers and carried to his home; but his reason was gone, and in his ravings he disclosed this awful story. He grew worse and worse, and within a week was in *his coffin*. Many thought the drink and excitement had made him fancy this vision: but many believed in the DEAD MAN'S RACE.

That night nobody would leave Walton Hall, and it was whispered that the maids were all so frightened, that not one of them would sleep alone:—perhaps they slept with each other.

ON THE DEATH OF MRS. MACLEAN, (L. E. L.)

And thou art dead! It falls upon the ear,
 And heart, with a most strange, and startling sound;
 For there doth seem a halo bright and clear,
 The young, and lov'd, and gifted to surround,
 As if to shield them from the tyrant's power;
 And while we build for them high hopes on earth,
 We in their future picture not that hour,
 Which quells all hope that has so low a birth.

Thy genius was a mine of Poesy!
 Yet some there were, who, though it gave rich ore,
 Still deem'd most precious veins untouch'd did lie,
 (Thyself, perchance, unconscious of such store),
 And fondly thought that in that far-off clime,
 Choosing some lofty and unhackney'd strain
 With mind matured by travel, change, and time,
 Thy lyre's rich music oft would wake again!

Life's chequer'd book had but just turn'd for thee
 A new and glowing page of hope and love,—
 Alas! the records brief were doom'd to be,—
 Death severs ties nought else could ever move.
 And cold the brow where hangs thy wreath of fame,
 Yet not a leaf of it is lost or faded;
 And faithfully enshrin'd shall be thy name,
 In hearts that sorrow for thy loss has shaded.

And thou hast only now a foreign grave,—
 Far from all memories of olden time;
 Where skies are bright, and palm-trees gently wave
 In the hot air of Afric's sultry clime;
 And stars which there keep nightly watch above
 Are strange, and shed no rays on this dear land,
 Which yet, methinks, that thou full well didst love,
 And yearn to, even from that distant strand!

CAMILLA TOULMIN.