

Life in Death

By Anonymous

‘Who shall deny the mighty secrets hid In Time and Nature?’

‘But can you not learn where he sups?’ asked the dying man, for at least the twentieth time; while the servants again repeated the same monotonous answer—‘Lord, sir, we never know where our young master goes.’

‘Place a time-piece by the bed-side, and leave me.’

None was at hand; when one of the assembled group exclaimed—‘Fetch that in Mr Francis’s room.’

It was a small French clock, of exquisite workmanship, and a golden Cupid swung to and fro,—fitting emblem for the light and vain hours of its youthful proprietor, but a strange mockery beside a death-bed! Yet the patient watched it with a strange expression of satisfaction, mingled, too, with anxiety, as the glittering hands pursued their appointed round. As the minutes passed on, an ejaculation of dismay burst from Mr Saville’s lips: he strove to raise his left hand with a gesture of impatience; he found it powerless too; the palsy, which had smitten his right side, had now attacked the left. ‘A thousand curses upon my evil destiny—I am lost!’

At this moment the time-piece struck four, and began to play one of the popular airs of that day; while the cord on which the Cupid was balanced moved, modulated by the fairy-like music. ‘He comes!’ almost shrieked the palsied wretch, making a vain effort to rise on his pillow. As if the loss of every other sense had quickened that of hearing seven-fold, he heard the distant tramp of horses, and the ring of wheels, on the hard and frosty road. The carriage stopped; a young man, wrapped in furs, sprang out, opened the door with his own key, and ran up the stairs, gaily singing,

‘They may rail at this earth: from the hour I began it,
I have found it a world full of sunshine and bliss;
And till I can find out some happier planet,
More social and bright, I’ll content me with this.’

‘Good God, sir, don’t sing—your father’s dying!’ exclaimed the servant who ran to meet him. The youth was silenced in a moment; and, pale and breathless, sprang towards the chamber. The dying man had no longer power to move a limb: the hand which his son took was useless as that of the new-born infant; yet all the anxiety and eagerness of life was in his features.

‘I have much to say, Francis; see that we are alone.’

‘I hope my master does not call this dying like a Christian,’ muttered the housekeeper as she withdrew. ‘I hope Mr Francis will make him send for a priest, or at least a doctor. People have no right to go out of the world in any such heathen manner.’

The door slammed heavily, and father and son were left alone.

‘Reach me that casket,’ said Mr Saville, pointing to a curiously carved Indian box of ebony. Francis obeyed the command, and resumed his kneeling position by the bed.

‘By the third hand of that many-armed image of Vishnu is a spring, press it forcibly.’

The youth obeyed and the lid flew up, within was a very small glass phial containing a liquid of delicate rose colour. The white and distorted countenance of the sufferer lighted up with a wild unnatural joy.

‘Oh youth, glad beautiful youth, art thou mine again, shall I once more rejoice in the smile of woman, in the light of the red wine cup, shall I delight in the dance, and in the sound of music?’

‘For heaven’s sake compose yourself,’ said his son, who thought that his parent was seized with sudden insanity. ‘In truth I am mad to waste breath so precious!—Listen to me, boy! A whole existence is contained in that little bottle; from my earliest youth I have ever felt a nameless horror of death, death yet more loathsome than terrible: you have seen me engrossed by lonely and mysterious studies, you knew not that they were devoted to perpetual struggle with the mighty conqueror—and I have succeeded. That phial contains a liquid which rubbed over my body, when the breath has left it seemingly for ever, will stop the progress of corruption, and restore all its pristine bloom and energy. Yes, Francis, I shall rise up before you like your brother. My glorious secret! how could I ever deem life wasted in the search? Sometimes when I have heard the distant chimes tell the hour of midnight, the hour of others’ revelry or rest, I have asked, is not the present too mighty a sacrifice to the future; had I not better enjoy the pleasures within my grasp? but one engrossing hope led me on; it is now fulfilled. I return to this world with the knowledge of experience, and the freshness of youth; I will not again give myself up to feverish studies and eternal experiments. I have wealth unbounded, we will spend it together, earth holds no luxury which it shall deny us.’

The dying man paused, for he observed that his son was not attending to his words, but stared as if his gaze was spellbound by the phial which he held.

‘Francis,’ gasped his father.

‘There is very little,’ muttered the son, still eying the crimson fluid.

The dews rose in large cold drops on Saville’s forehead—with a last effort he raised his head, and looked into the face of his child—there was no hope there; cold, fixed, and cruel, the gentleness of youth seemed suddenly to have passed away, and left the stern features rigid as stone; his words died gurgling in the throat, his head sank back on the pillow, in the last agony of disappointment, despair, and death. A wild howl filled the chamber, and Francis started in terror from his knee; it was only the little black terrier which had been his father’s favourite. Hastily he concealed the casket, for he heard the hurrying steps of the domestics, and rushing past them, sought his own room, and locked the door. All were struck by his altered and ghastly looks.

‘Poor child,’ said the housekeeper, ‘I do not wonder he takes his father’s death so to heart, for the old man doated on the very ground he trod upon. Now the holy saints have mercy upon us,’ exclaimed she, making the sign of the cross, as she caught sight of the horrible and distorted face of the deceased.

Francis passed the three following days in the alternate stupor and excitement of one to whom crime is new, and who is nevertheless resolved on its commission. On the evening of the fourth he heard a noise in the room where the corpse lay, and again the dog began his loud and doleful howl. He entered the apartment, and the two first men he saw were strangers, dressed in black with faces of set solemnity; they were the undertakers, while a third in a canvass apron, and square paper cap, was beginning to screw down the coffin, and while so doing was carelessly telling them how a grocer’s shop, his next-door neighbour’s, had been entered during the night, and the till robbed.

‘You will leave the coffin unscrewed till to-morrow,’ said the heir. The man bowed, asked the usual English question which suits all occasions, of ‘Something to drink, sir?’ and then left

young Saville to his meditations. Strange images of death and pleasures mingled together; now it was a glorious banquet, now the gloomy silence of a church-yard; now bright and beautiful faces seemed to fill the air, then by a sudden transition they became the cadaverous relics of the charnel-house. Some clock in the neighbourhood struck the hour, it was too faint for Francis to hear it distinctly, but it roused him; he turned towards the little time-piece, there the golden cupid sat motionless, the hands stood still, it had not been wound up; the deep silence around told how late it was; the fire was burning dead, the candles were dark with their large unsnuffed wicks, and strange shadows, gigantic in their proportions, flitted round the room.

‘Fool that I am to be thus haunted by a vain phantasy. My father studied overmuch; his last words might be but the insane ravings of a mind overwrought. I will know the truth.’

Again his youthful features hardened into the gladiatorial expression of one grown old in crime and cruelty. Forth he went and returned with the Indian casket; he drew a table towards the coffin, placed two candles upon it, and raised the lid: he started, some one touched him; it was only the little black terrier licking his hand, and gazing up in his face with a look almost human in its affectionate earnestness. Francis put back the shroud, and then turned hastily away, sick and faint at the ghastly sight. The work of corruption had begun, and the yellow and livid streaks awoke even more disgust than horror. But an evil purpose is ever strong; he carefully opened the phial, and with a steady hand, let one drop fall on the eye of the corpse. He closed the bottle, replaced it in the casket, and then, but not till then, looked for its effect. The eye, large, melancholy, and of that deep violet blue, which only belongs to early childhood, as if it were too pure and too heavenly for duration on earth, had opened, and full of life and beauty was gazing tenderly upon him. A delicious perfume filled the air; ah, the old man was right! Others had sought the secret of life in the grave, and the charnel-house; he had sought it amid the warm and genial influences of nature; he had watched the invigorating sap bringing back freshness to the forest tree; he had marked the subtle spring wakening the dead root and flower into bloom—the essence of a thousand existences was in that fragile crystal. The eye now turned anxiously towards the casket, then with a mute eloquence towards the son; it gazed upon him so piteously, he saw himself mirrored in the large clear pupil; it seemed to implore, to persuade, and at last, the long soft lash glistened, and tears, warm bright tears, rolled down the livid cheek. Francis sat and watched with a cruel satisfaction; a terrible expression of rage kindled the eye like fire, then it dilated with horror, and then glared terribly with despair. Francis shrank from the fixed and stony gaze. But his very terror was selfish.

‘It must not witness against me,’ rushed into his mind. He seized a fold of the grave clothes, crushed the eye in the socket, and closed the lid of the coffin. A yell of agony rose upon the silent night. Francis was about to smite the howling dog, when he saw that it lay dead at his feet. He hurried with his precious casket from the chamber, which he never entered again. Years have passed away, and the once gay and handsome Francis Saville is a grey and decrepit man, bowed by premature old age, and with a constitution broken by excess. But the shrewd man has been careful in his calculations; he knew how selfish early indulgence and worldly knowledge had made himself, and he had resolved that so his children should not be corrupted: he had two, a boy and a girl, who had been brought up in the strictest ignorance and seclusion, and in the severest practices of the Catholic faith. He well knew that fear is a stronger bond than love, and his children trembled in the presence of the father, whom their mother’s latest words had yet enjoined them to cherish. Still the feeling of dutiful affection is strong in the youthful heart, though Mr Saville resolved not to tempt it, by one hint of his precious secret.

‘I cannot bear to look in the glass,’ exclaimed Mr Saville, as he turned away from his own image in a large mirror opposite; ‘why should I bear about this weight of years and deformity? My plan is all matured, and never will its execution be certain as now. Walter must soon lose his present insecure and devout simplicity, and on them only can I rely. Yes, this very night will I fling off the slough of years, and awake to youth, warm, glad, and buoyant youth.’

Mr Saville now rang the bell for his attendants to assist him to bed.

When comfortably settled, his children came as usual to wish him good night, and kneel for his blessing; he received them with the most touching tenderness. ‘I feel,’ said he, ‘unusually ill to-night. I would fain, Edith, speak with your brother alone.’

Edith kissed her father’s hand, and withdrew.

‘You were at confession to-day when I sent for you,’ continued the invalid, addressing the youth, who leant anxiously by his pillow. ‘Ah, my beloved child, what a blessed thing it is to be early trained to the paths of salvation. Alas! at your age I was neglected and ignorant; but for that, many things which now press heavily on my conscience had, I trust, never been. It was not till after my marriage with that blessed saint your mother that my conscience was awakened. I made a pilgrimage to Rome, and received from the hands of our holy Father the Pope, a precious oil, distilled from the wood of the true cross, which, rubbed over my body as soon as the breath of life be departed, will purify my mortal remains from sin, and the faith in which I die will save my soul from purgatory. May I rely upon the dutiful obedience of my child to the last wishes of his parent?’

‘Oh, my father!’ sobbed the youth.

‘Extinguish the lights, for it is not fitting that humanity should watch the mysteries of faith; and, by your own hope of salvation, anoint the body the moment life is fled. It is contained in this casket,’ pointing to the little ebony box; ‘and thus you undo the spring. Leave me now, my child. I have need of rest and meditation.’

The youth obeyed; when, as he was about to close the door, he heard the voice of Mr Saville, ‘Remember, Walter; my blessing or my curse will follow you through life, according as you obey my last words. My blessing or my curse!’

The moment he left the room Mr Saville unfastened the casket, and from another drawer took a bottle of laudanum: he poured its contents into the negus on his table, and drank the draught!—The midnight was scarce passed when the nurse, surprised at the unwonted quiet of her usually querulous and impetuous patient, approached and undrew the curtain: her master was dead! The house was immediately alarmed. Walter and his sister were still sitting up in the small oratory which had been their mother’s, and both hastened to the chamber of death. Ignorance has its blessing; what a world of corruption and distrust would have entered those youthful hearts, could they have known the worthlessness of the parent they mourned with such innocent and endearing sorrow.

Walter was the first to check his tears. ‘I have, as you know, Edith, a sacred duty to perform; leave me for awhile alone, and we will afterwards spend the night in prayer for our father’s soul.’

The girl left the room, and her brother proceeded with his task. He opened the casket and took out the phial; the candles were then extinguished, and, first telling the beads of his rosary, he approached the bed. The night was dark, and the shrill wind moaned like a human being in some great agony, but the pious son felt no horror as he raised the body in his arms to perform his holy office. An exquisite odour exhaled from the oil, which he began to rub lightly and carefully over the head. Suddenly he started, the phial fell from his hand and was dashed to atoms on the floor.

‘His face is warm—I feel his breath! Edith, dear Edith! come here. The nurse was wrong: my father lives!’

His sister ran from the adjacent room, where she had been kneeling before an image of the Madonna in earnest supplication, with a small taper in her hand: both stood motionless from terror as the light fell on the corpse. There were the contracted and emaciated hands laid still and rigid on the counterpane; the throat, stretched and bare, was meagre and withered; but the head was that of a handsome youth, full of freshness and life. The rich chestnut curls hung in golden waves on the white forehead, a bright colour was on the cheek, and the fresh, red lips were like those of a child; the large hazel eyes were open, and looked from one to the other, but the expression was that of a fiend,—rage, hate, and despair mingling together, like the horrible beauty given to the head of Medusa. The children fled from the room, only, however, to return with the priest, who deemed that sudden sorrow had unsettled their reason. His own eyes convinced him of the truth: there was the living head on the dead body!

The beautiful face became convulsed with passion, froth stood upon the lips, and the small white teeth were gnashed in impotent rage.

‘This is, surely, some evil spirit,’ and the trembling priest proceeded with the form of exorcism, but in vain.

Walter then, with a faltering voice, narrated his last interview with his father.

‘The sinner,’ said the old chaplain, ‘is taken in his own snare. This is assuredly the judgment of God.’

All night did the three pray beside that fearful bed: at length the morning light of a glad day in June fell on the head. It now looked pale and exhausted, and the lips were wan. Ever and anon, it was distorted by sudden spasms,—youth and health were maintaining a terrible struggle with hunger and pain. The weather was sultry, and the body showed livid spots of decomposition; the beautiful head was still alive, but the damp stood on the forehead, and the cheeks were sunken. Three days and three nights did that brother and sister maintain their ghastly watch. The head was evidently dying. Twice the eyes opened with a wild and strong glare; the third time they closed for ever. Pale, beautiful, but convulsed, the youthful head and the aged body,—the one but just cold, the other far gone in corruption,—were laid in the coffin together!