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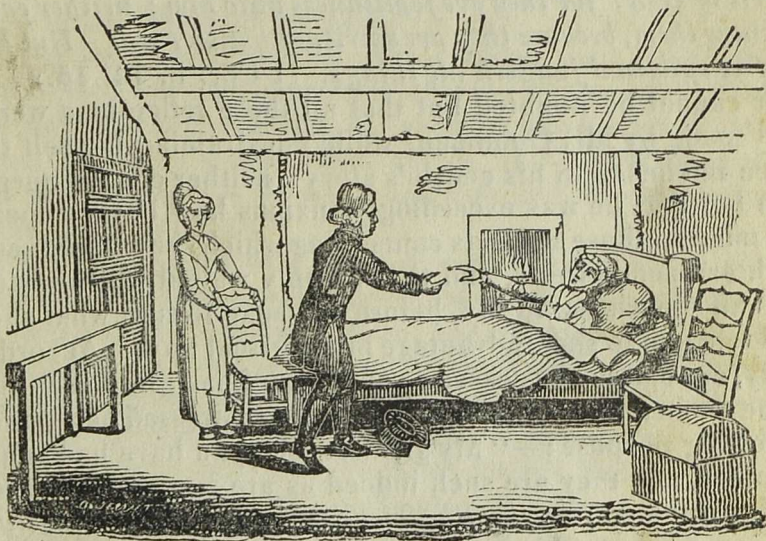
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THE
BITTER SWEET.

PART II.

BY MRS. SHERWOOD,

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The Bitter Sweet.



PART II.

IN the former part of this tale I related the history which Mrs. Bennet gave of herself; by which it appears, that this woman was one of those ordinary characters who, never having experienced the power of regenerating grace, could only form a judgment of things as they passed according to her own carnal conceptions, being unable to discern any spiritual good in any of those divine dispensations whereby her earthly hopes and worldly prospects had been cut down and withered. Neither, if we read Scripture aright, or consult our own experience, should we wonder at this: for it is written—*The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.* (Rom. viii. 7.) And again—*The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things.* (1 Cor. ii. 14, 15.)

It cannot be doubted but that all these reflections were duly made by Mr. Goodman, while constraining himself to listen in silence to his cousin's story; neither can we question but that he was exceedingly anxious how best to open her mind on those subjects concerning which she entertained such erroneous views, and that he only waited till she had said all she wished to say, before he began to turn what she had told him to some advantage in a spiritual way. Accordingly, as soon as she ceased to speak, and had given vent for some moments to her tears and sobs, he addressed her to the following purpose:—"My good cousin, you have had your troubles, and they are such indeed as are most grievous to flesh and blood; for *health, friends, and earthly prosperity*, are indeed those things which are most sweet to the natural man. Yet the Almighty has dealt with you in a manner so tender, and so full of mercy, that, amidst all your bereavements, you have need of songs of praise and thanksgiving."

"Songs of praise!" repeated Mrs. Bennet, looking with indignation at Mr. Goodman; "songs of praise!—And is this all the comfort you have to give me, Henry Goodman?"

"Yes, cousin," returned Mr. Goodman, "yes, you have need of praise and thanksgiving. For were not your husband

and child found of him whom they never sought? is there not good reason to believe that they are now in glory? and is not opportunity granted you for seeking the same glory? Are you not now compelled to retire from scenes of vice and dissipation, and allowed time and leisure for repentance?" Mr. Goodman then repeated this beautiful verse—

" Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace ;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face."

Mrs. Bennet appeared to pay no attention to the sentiments expressed in this quotation; but repeating the words "vice and dissipation," which Mr. Goodman had dropped, and taking fire at these, she asked him what reason he had to suppose that she had ever lived in vice and dissipation? "I am sure," added she, "no one had ever occasion to charge me with immoral conduct. While I lived with my Lady, as I told you before, I was a very strict church-goer, particularly in the country; and though people may have talked, yet I am sure it was altogether without reason, for no one ever saw me in the smallest degree overcome with liquor or any thing of the kind."

"Far be it from me, my dear cousin," said Mr. Goodman, "to bring any particular charges against you;—I, who have neither seen you, nor even heard your name mentioned, for many years. But, surely, you cannot be ignorant that all men are sinners? and that all have come short of the glory of God?"

The answer which Mrs. Bennet made to this remark, convinced Mr. Goodman that, if any good was to be done through his means to the unhappy woman, her understanding as well as her heart must be set right on religious subjects. Though living in a Christian country, it was very plain that she was in a state of total darkness respecting true religion; and as she seemed very unwilling to hear, he felt that he should have no easy task in making her understand even the common outlines of the Christian system. However, he resolved to make the trial, and to set before her, in as few words as possible, the great leading truths of our holy religion: viz. the existence and nature of the one God, the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, together with the offices of these Persons in the great work of redemption. He also spoke to her of the fall of man, and the everlasting purposes of God, 'whereby, before the foundations of the world were laid, he decreed by his counsel to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by

Christ to everlasting salvation.' He likewise pointed out how those who were saved were justified freely in Christ; and being 'called according to God's purpose by his Spirit, they through grace obey the call, and being made sons of God by adoption, be made like the image of his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ; they walk religiously in good works; and at length, by God's mercy, attain to everlasting felicity.'

But when, after many repetitions, and frequent requests that she would not interrupt him, he hoped he had succeeded so far as to make her understand some little of what he was aiming at, she replied, that his manner of talking was so like her poor husband's, that she could almost believe she heard him again; adding, at the same time, that these doctrines might do very well among Methodists, and people of that kind, but that she, for her part, belonged to the Church of England, and would never be induced to listen to a new religion.

"Why, my dear Madam," said Mr. Goodman, "I have been repeating to you the very words of the Articles of the Established Church. Lend me your Prayer-Book, and I will point them out to you."

"It does not signify looking for a Prayer-Book now," replied Mrs. Bennet, peevishly; "we have met together for a little talk, and not for the purpose of reading and turning over books. I have done very well till now, and I don't see why I am to be taking up new doctrines at my time of life."

"You have done very well!" said Mr. Goodman: "why, did you not but now tell me that you had found nothing but misery in the world? You are either happy or you are not so, cousin Bennet: if you are content, why trouble me with so many complaints? and if you are unhappy in your old course, why refuse to seek a new one?—why refuse to take that way which your blessed husband and child have taken? This world, with all its pleasures, has abandoned you; your old acquaintance have forgotten you; your riches have taken wing and fled away; sickness, old age, and death, are at hand; and yet you refuse the only comfort which offers itself!"

Here the good man repeated several of the precious promises which abound in Scripture. "*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.* (Matt. xi. 28—30.) *All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in nowise cast out.* (John vi. 37.) O my

cousin!" added the good man, "I trust that you are one who is already given to the Lord: I consider the blessed change which took place before death in your husband and child as an earnest of good to you; and, as a minister of the Gospel, I call on you to come to your Saviour: I assure you of his readiness to receive you, and I warn you of the destruction which awaits you, if you do not obey the call."

The good man was here suddenly interrupted by the entrance of a gossiping old lady, who came in to ask her neighbour if she had a mind of a game at all-fours, at the same time turning her eye towards a greasy pack of cards, which Mr. Goodman had not before observed, as they were half hid by one of the painted flower-pots on the mantle-shelf.

In reply to this, Mrs. Bennet excused herself from the party at all-fours on account of her visitor, adding, at the same time, that perhaps Mr. Goodman might not object to a hand at tredille or three-handed whist.

It was in vain for Mr. Goodman to endeavour to repress a deep sigh, or rather groan, which made its escape from his breast as he heard this proposal; but, without making any answer, he rose in haste from his chair, took his hat and stick, and wished the ladies a good night, promising to call again on his cousin in the course of a few days.

Mrs. Bennet was by no means sorry to hear the street-door shut after her cousin, for she had begun sorely to repent having sent for him, not expecting to find in him one who would deal so plainly with her. His conversation, however, had left such an impression on her mind, that, as she was dealing the cards, (for she sat down to all-fours as soon as ever she believed him to be got fairly into the street,) she sighed several times, complaining much of her old disorder, which was an oppression on her chest.

"You are low, Mrs. Bennet," said Mrs. Derby, the old lady above mentioned, "you are low this afternoon. Have you taken your drops as usual? or perhaps you have been fatigued with conversation? To be sure, the gentleman who just went out looked agreeable enough; but he seemed to have a strange aversion to cards."

"He is a worthy man, I dare say," replied Mrs. Bennet, "though very odd and very particular I doubt not. But, you know, Mrs. Derby, one person may be of one way of thinking, and one of another; and unless people are agreed, it is not very easy to keep up a conversation. And another thing, the sight of him, for he is a very old acquaintance, brought old troubles to my mind, and led me to the comparison of what I was in my better days, and what I might

have been had all things turned out well, with what I am now; and these thoughts, you know, are very overpowering, and very oppressive to the nerves."

So saying, the old lady began to shed tears: on which Mrs. Derby, getting up, went to a cupboard in the wainscot, and brought out a small glass of brandy, which she gave to her companion, saying, "Come, come, I know what you want—you have been kept too long without your drops."

The brandy being swallowed, and Mrs. Derby being persuaded to take a little herself, Mrs. Bennet soon recovered her spirits, and the two old ladies spent the remainder of the evening in their usual way.

And now it may be easily understood wherefore Mrs. Bennet was so anxious to keep her ears and heart shut against that religion which she knew could not subsist with evil habits secretly indulged. She had long been addicted to drinking strong liquors in a guarded manner, and he who indulges sin in secret will always feel his heart closed against God.

The next morning, Mrs. Bennet told her maid, if Mr. Goodman should call, to say that she was from home, and on no account ever to let him in again. And since the maid had taken as great a dislike as the mistress to this good old gentleman, whose mild and holy deportment carried with it a kind of censure on all ill-doing, he was always dismissed, whenever he came to the house, with an assurance that Mrs. Bennet had just stepped out to see a neighbour, and would not be back till very late. Mr. Goodman did not at first apprehend the nature of these excuses, and so continued his visits for some time: but, at length, finding that he had only his labour for his pains, he one day bought a new Bible, and having wrapped it up in such a way as prevented its appearing to be what it really was until the parcel was opened, he left it, with his best wishes, at his cousin's door, stating that he should be ready to call upon her whenever she should signify that she wished to see him.

From that time, Mr. Goodman heard no more of his cousin for two years; during which period her habits of drinking becoming more excessive, she was robbed by her servant, her lodgers left her, and she found herself reduced to the necessity of selling her furniture to pay her tradesmen's bills, and even of retiring to a little mean dwelling, where she lodged in an upper room, having no other attendant but Martha Noel, a poor woman who lived in the house, and who had served in the capacity of washerwoman to the

Rose Coffee-House. One blessing, however, still attended the unhappy woman in this her most destitute state—the washerwoman, now become her nurse, was acquainted with the truth, and, though poor, was pious.

In the mean time, diseases of various kinds inflamed and perhaps originally occasioned by intemperance, tormented, without ceasing, the miserable Mrs. Bennet, neither allowing her rest by day nor night; and, in a word, it seemed that human misery could scarcely be rendered more complete than it appeared in the case of this wretched woman when brought to this her last lodging.

And here I might fill whole volumes in describing the workings of Mrs. Bennet's mind, when she first found herself laid on a clean bedstead, without curtains, in a garret belonging to the house of one with whom she would have scorned in her better days, as she called them, to exchange a dozen words which were not connected with business; having no furniture about her but a couple of chairs, a deal table, and a trunk containing a few clothes, together with the only present she had ever received from her cousin, and which shame alone had prevented her from selling. The feelings of this poor creature were, at first, those only of unmingled rage and indignation; and in this first fit of resentment it is not known what blasphemies she might have uttered, had she not been checked by Martha Noel, who, as she was busied in lighting her fire in the little grate, and putting things in the best order she could, from time to time kept soothing her old mistress much to the following purpose—"Nay, dear Madam Bennet, don't take on after such a manner: be sure I will make you as comfortable as I can. This world, you know, is not our resting-place; thank God, there is a better prepared for those who love the Lord. Think of the dear saints who are gone before: think of my good master, how he gave up the world for the love of his Saviour; dear soul, he would have no more to do with unholy gains. And then that sweet Miss Rachel, did she not choose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season? Ah! how did that lovely creature die! how peaceful, how happy, how triumphant, was her faith!—not a murmur—not a complaint. She was indeed a blessed creature."

In this manner, the old woman, still going about her work, frequently discoursed with Mrs. Bennet, and by her sincere piety awed that unhappy sufferer into silence. The integrity of this good Christian also served her in many other instances. Martha Noel had procured a doctor for

Mrs. Bennet, and it was impossible for Mrs. Bennet to obtain from Martha either food or liquor, in any kind or measure, different from what the doctor had ordered. Martha was fully aware of the sinful infirmity of Mrs. Bennet with respect to ardent liquors, and she could by no means be induced to encourage her in this sin: moreover, she managed her very small income, which arose only from an annuity left her by her former Lady, with such economy, that all her absolute wants were supplied, while care was taken to leave in her way only the Bible, and such other books as might administer to her spiritual wants.

I have before said, that it would fill volumes were I to describe all that passed in the mind of Mrs. Bennet, as she lay in her garret, in the situation I have described—a prey at times to racking pains of body, and still more bitter pangs of conscience: for her conscience, which had long been deadened by the use of stupifying liquors, began to do its proper work as soon as she was compelled to the disuse of such liquors; when many things which she had heard her husband and daughter say in their illnesses, together with all which Mr. Goodman had urged at their last meeting, recurred to her mind, and, by the divine blessing, did not recur without a beneficial effect. As time, however, will not permit me to enter largely into these particulars, I shall simply say, that, some months after Mrs. Bennet's reception into the house of Martha Noel, such a decided change took place in her whole character, that those very events and transactions of her past life which she had been accustomed to look upon as the most bitter and afflictive, she now learned to number among the most sweet and tender testimonies of that redeeming love, which had purposed her salvation ere yet the forefather of mankind had been called into existence. As divine love, connected with a sense of her own depravity, obtained the ascendancy in her heart, she would often thus address her poor and lowly companion.—“Oh, Martha Noel, what a wretch have I been! How did I cling to the world! And how should I have clung thereto even until I had perished, had not the Almighty by his salutary chastisements compelled me to feel that what I counted my chief gain was preparing for me destruction, and that those things which afflicted the flesh and brought down my high thoughts, were appointed to be the means of bringing me into the way of salvation.”

Mrs. Bennet had been nearly twelve months lying on her bed in the garret of Martha Noel's house, when she bethought herself that it was possible Mr. Goodman might

now forgive her ill treatment of him, and condescend to pay her a visit in her lowly situation: she accordingly sent to request that he would favour her with his company. It was on occasion of this visit that the following conversation took place, with which I am now about to conclude this history.

Mrs. Bennet was lying on her bed, having on her head a clean cap of coarse Irish cloth with a narrow plaited border, her flaxen wig being laid aside, while her pale emaciated face wore the expression of deep humility. As Mr. Goodman entered, she stretched out her thin hand, and said, "Cousin Goodman, can you forgive me? I have behaved very ill to you."

"No more of that, dear Madam," returned the old gentleman, bowing more low to her as she lay on her humble pallet than he would have done in her handsome parlour behind the bar at the Rose Coffee-House. Mr. Goodman then took a seat which was tendered to him by Martha Noel, and taking in at one glance the whole furniture of the room, as well as the little grate, in which a bright fire was then burning, for it was cold weather, "I am glad to see, cousin," he said, "that you are so comfortable, every thing so clean and nice about you, and that you are so high and quiet above the street. I'll tell you what, cousin Bennet, I like your situation and your company twenty to one better than I did in the last place where I visited you."

"Ah! cousin Goodman," replied Mrs. Bennet, "I have reason to bless the day which brought me here. How often, how very often since I have been in this place, have I thought of the verse which you repeated to me; and Martha Noel, here, my good friend and comforter, has been so kind as to procure the hymn for me." Mrs. Bennet then repeated—

"Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face;—"

Adding, "O! Henry Goodman! wonderful are the means by which I have been brought from darkness to light, and from death to life. One of the greatest blessings perhaps I have ever enjoyed has been my sleepless nights. Cousin Goodman, I am a very bad sleeper; indeed for some years I have not known what it is to sleep the night through: but since I came here, I have constantly lain awake for hours, counting the church clock not unfrequently from eleven or twelve till four or perhaps five. These were at first dark, heavy, wearisome hours to me, and I would have given the world for a light, or a book, or something to pass

away the time. But it was not for me to waste money for lights to burn in the night, so I was compelled to take my own thoughts for my companions: and O, what torment did these thoughts inflict at one time, taking their colour as they did from the pain and anguish of my body, and giving me, as it were, a foretaste of the miseries of eternal death; till at length I was forced in very grief of heart to cry out, 'Ah, whither shall I fly for help!' And then, my good nurse here, being at hand in the morning to direct me where to apply, and whose merits to plead in my own behalf, seeing I had none of my own, I was drawn, by the divine blessing on my weary nights, to call on the Saviour, and cling, as it were, to his cross, before I well knew where I was. This has led me to think what a blessing it is to the sick, particularly to sinful wretches such as myself, to be kept awake in the dead and still hours of night. In the day, we have always one little thing or other to divert our thoughts; but when all is silent, and still, and dark around us, at such a season the emptiness of all worldly pursuits is likely to be rendered more manifest, while death and the invisible world are apt to make a stronger impression upon the mind."

"Well," said Mr. Goodman, "I am glad, my good cousin, that you have been able to bring your waking hours during the night to some advantage, and to render them so beneficial to your soul. This is a comfortable hearing to your friends; and in this place you have no doubt enjoyed other advantages."

"In this place," said Mrs. Bennet, "and in all other places through life, I have been wonderfully blessed, my good cousin. I have taken many a review of my life, since I became an inmate here. Surely goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life! What an instance of the Lord's tender care was it, that I should marry as I did! Mr. Bennet was even in his unchanged state as kind a husband as ever lived. And how wonderful it was at the last that he should be so powerfully drawn towards God, as to give up his public way of life for the purpose of knowing him more and loving him better. Think, Mr. Goodman, what my condition would have been had he kept up the Rose till his death, and left me in possession of it. In that case I should assuredly have kept on the business, and perhaps have finished my days in that house, in the midst of all the bustle and hurry of that way of life. O what a misfortune might it have proved to me, had I remained there in a situation so full of snares, where com-

pany and good living were at my command at all times! O, cousin, cousin, I tremble to think of it. And then again, had the Lord allowed me my own way about my beloved Rachel, what would her situation have been now, had she lived, and married an unprincipled young man! How different would have been her situation, I say, compared with what it is now, in glory everlasting, never changing glory! And then, to think how the great work of salvation was wrought for my husband and child wholly and entirely through the mercy of God, unsought by them, and undesired by me! Surely, Henry Goodman, you have not in all your experience met with a case like mine. I may indeed be compared to the labourer, who having wrought only one hour in the Lord's vineyard, was made equal to those who had borne the burden and heat of the day. But I have not wrought even my one hour; I have never done any thing for my Lord; I never can do any thing; and yet the Almighty showers down upon me the best of his blessings, and satisfies me with every precious thing."

It cannot be doubted but that Mr. Goodman was much astonished to hear these words from the lips of the same person, who a little less than three years ago was ready to charge Providence with injustice for those very dispensations which she now considered as real blessings. Not being informed of the change in her character, thus wonderfully wrought by regenerating grace, and having more fresh in his mind by far than she had the unsatisfactory conversation he had held with her in his first visit, he could hardly restrain his expressions of amazement, while he gazed upon her with mute astonishment. But observing that her countenance was calm and placid, and that the expression of her eye was meek and lowly, as she lay reclining upon her pillow, he began to feel a persuasion that her heart was really changed, and that she truly felt all she expressed. However, he thought it right to try her with some searching questions respecting the ground of her faith, as well as relating to the sense which she had of her own accumulated guilt and utter helplessness.

She hearkened to him a while in deep silence, when bursting into tears, and clasping together her sallow and emaciated hands, she exclaimed, "Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief."

Pleased with these expressions of humility, Mr. Goodman was filled with thankfulness, and could not forbear exclaiming, in the triumph of his feelings, "O my God! I thank thee; my prayers, my unworthy prayers, have indeed

been heard for this my poor afflicted friend: for she was dead, and is alive again—was lost, and is found.”

He then proceeded to point out to Mrs. Bennet that which had most struck him in the two conversations which he had held with her. “You perhaps,” he said, “do not recollect the tendency of our first discourse, because you spoke then only as you always spoke; all you then said consisted of complaints respecting your hard destiny: and it is remarkable, that you then pointed out those very events of your life as being the most cruel inflictions of Providence, which you have numbered this day among your greatest mercies. I need not name what these were; but I wish you to observe this circumstance, as it indicates, I trust, that blessed change in your own mind which must take place in every one before he can be admitted into the kingdom of God. For it is written—*Unless a man be born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven*: and certain it is, that, when the heart is changed, that which before was sweet to the natural man becomes bitterness to the saint, and that which was gall and wormwood to the natural man becomes full of sweetness to the regenerate creature. Hence the servant of the Lord is enabled to rejoice evermore: he no longer puts darkness for light and light for darkness, nor bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter; but he rejoices in hope, is patient in tribulation, and triumphant in death.”

The little party, thus assembled in their humble garret, united in a prayer, which was led by the excellent Mr. Goodman; after which the holy man tendered his purse to his afflicted cousin, afflicted indeed in the body, but blessed in the spirit. His offers of this kind were not, however, accepted, as Mrs. Bennet made it appear that she had sufficient left for all her necessities.

From that time, Mr. Goodman frequently visited his poor cousin, and received every desirable evidence of her daily growth in grace, until the bitterness of death was past, and the redeemed soul received into everlasting glory.

And now, my reader, let us look to ourselves, and enquire whether we are not still in the number of those who put light for darkness, and bitter for sweet; and let us give all diligence to shun the woes denounced against characters of such a description.

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