

BOOK IX.

MORE LIGHT, AND THE GLOOM OF THAT LIGHT. MORE GLOOM, AND THE  
LIGHT OF  
THAT GLOOM.

I.

In those Hyperborean regions, to which enthusiastic Truth, and Earnestness, and Independence, will invariably lead a mind fitted by nature for profound and fearless thought, all objects are seen in a dubious, uncertain, and refracting light. Viewed through that rarefied atmosphere the most immemorially admitted maxims of men begin to slide and fluctuate, and finally become wholly inverted; the very heavens themselves being not innocent of producing this confounding effect, since it is mostly in the heavens themselves that these wonderful mirages are exhibited.

But the example of many minds forever lost, like undiscoverable Arctic explorers, amid those treacherous regions, warns us entirely away from them; and we learn that it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too far, since by so doing he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind; for arrived at the Pole, to whose barrenness only it points, there, the needle indifferently respects all points of the horizon alike.

But even the less distant regions of thought are not without their singular introversions. Hardly any sincere man of ordinary reflective powers, and accustomed to exercise them at all, but must have been independently struck by the thought, that, after all, what is so enthusiastically applauded as the march of mind,--meaning the inroads of Truth into Error--which has ever been regarded by hopeful persons as the one fundamental thing most earnestly to be prayed for as the greatest possible Catholic blessing to the world;--almost every thinking man must have been some time or other struck with the idea, that, in certain respects, a tremendous mistake may be lurking here, since all the world does never gregariously advance to Truth, but only here and there some of its individuals do; and by advancing, leave the rest behind; cutting themselves forever adrift from their sympathy, and making themselves always liable to be regarded with distrust, dislike, and often, downright--though, oftentimes, concealed--fear and hate. What wonder, then, that those advanced minds, which in spite of advance, happen still to remain, for the time, ill-regulated, should now and then be goaded into turning round in acts of wanton aggression upon sentiments and opinions now forever left in their rear. Certain it is, that in their earlier stages of advance, especially in youthful minds, as yet untranquilized by long habituation to the world as it inevitably and eternally is; this aggressiveness is almost invariably manifested, and as invariably afterward deplored by themselves.

That amazing shock of practical truth, which in the compass of a very

few days and hours had not so much advanced, as magically transplanted the youthful mind of Pierre far beyond all common discernments; it had not been entirely unattended by the lamentable rearward aggressiveness we have endeavored to portray above. Yielding to that unwarrantable mood, he had invaded the profound midnight slumbers of the Reverend Mr. Falsgrave, and most discourteously made war upon that really amiable and estimable person. But as through the strange force of circumstances his advance in insight had been so surprisingly rapid, so also was now his advance in some sort of wisdom, in charitableness; and his concluding words to Mr. Falsgrave, sufficiently evinced that already, ere quitting that gentleman's study, he had begun to repent his ever entering it on such a mission.

And as he now walked on in the profound meditations induced by the hour; and as all that was in him stirred to and fro, intensely agitated by the ever-creative fire of enthusiastic earnestness, he became fully alive to many palliating considerations, which had they previously occurred to him would have peremptorily forbidden his impulsive intrusion upon the respectable clergyman.

But it is through the malice of this earthly air, that only by being guilty of Folly does mortal man in many cases arrive at the perception of Sense. A thought which should forever free us from hasty imprecations upon our ever-recurring intervals of Folly; since though Folly be our teacher, Sense is the lesson she teaches; since if Folly wholly depart from us, Further Sense will be her companion in the flight, and we will

be left standing midway in wisdom. For it is only the miraculous vanity of man which ever persuades him, that even for the most richly gifted mind, there ever arrives an earthly period, where it can truly say to itself, I have come to the Ultimate of Human Speculative Knowledge; hereafter, at this present point I will abide. Sudden onsets of new truth will assail him, and over-turn him as the Tartars did China; for there is no China Wall that man can build in his soul, which shall permanently stay the irruptions of those barbarous hordes which Truth ever nourishes in the loins of her frozen, yet teeming North; so that the Empire of Human Knowledge can never be lasting in any one dynasty, since Truth still gives new Emperors to the earth.

But the thoughts we here indite as Pierre's are to be very carefully discriminated from those we indite concerning him. Ignorant at this time of the ideas concerning the reciprocity and partnership of Folly and Sense, in contributing to the mental and moral growth of the mind; Pierre keenly upbraided his thoughtlessness, and began to stagger in his soul; as distrustful of that radical change in his general sentiments, which had thus hurried him into a glaring impropriety and folly; as distrustful of himself, the most wretched distrust of all. But this last distrust was not of the heart; for heaven itself, so he felt, had sanctified that with its blessing; but it was the distrust of his intellect, which in undisciplinedly espousing the manly enthusiast cause of his heart, seemed to cast a reproach upon that cause itself.

But though evermore hath the earnest heart an eventual balm for the most

deplorable error of the head; yet in the interval small alleviation is to be had, and the whole man droops into nameless melancholy. Then it seems as though the most magnanimous and virtuous resolutions were only intended for fine spiritual emotions, not as mere preludes to their bodily translation into acts; since in essaying their embodiment, we have but proved ourselves miserable bunglers, and thereupon taken ignominious shame to ourselves. Then, too, the never-entirely repulsed hosts of Commonness, and Conventionalness, and Worldly Prudent-mindedness return to the charge; press hard on the faltering soul; and with inhuman hootings deride all its nobleness as mere eccentricity, which further wisdom and experience shall assuredly cure. The man is as seized by arms and legs, and convulsively pulled either way by his own indecisions and doubts. Blackness advances her banner over this cruel altercation, and he droops and swoons beneath its folds.

It was precisely in this mood of mind that, at about two in the morning, Pierre, with a hanging head, now crossed the private threshold of the Mansion of Saddle Meadows.

II.

In the profoundly silent heart of a house full of sleeping serving-men and maids, Pierre now sat in his chamber before his accustomed round table, still tossed with the books and the papers which, three days before, he had abruptly left, for a sudden and more absorbing object.

Uppermost and most conspicuous among the books were the Inferno of Dante, and the Hamlet of Shakspeare.

His mind was wandering and vague; his arm wandered and was vague. Soon he found the open Inferno in his hand, and his eye met the following lines, allegorically overscribed within the arch of the outgoings of the womb of human life:

"Through me you pass into the city of Woe;  
Through me you pass into eternal pain;  
Through me, among the people lost for aye.

\* \* \* \* \*

All hope abandon, ye who enter here."

He dropped the fatal volume from his hand; he dropped his fated head upon his chest.

His mind was wandering and vague; his arm wandered and was vague. Some moments passed, and he found the open Hamlet in his hand, and his eyes met the following lines:

"The time is out of joint;--Oh cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!"

He dropped the too true volume from his hand; his petrifying heart dropped hollowly within him, as a pebble down Carrisbrook well.

III.

The man Dante Alighieri received unforgivable affronts and insults from the world; and the poet Dante Alighieri bequeathed his immortal curse to it, in the sublime malediction of the Inferno. The fiery tongue whose political forkings lost him the solacements of this world, found its malicious counterpart in that muse of fire, which would forever bar the vast bulk of mankind from all solacement in the worlds to come.

Fortunately for the felicity of the Dilletante in Literature, the horrible allegorical meanings of the Inferno, lie not on the surface; but unfortunately for the earnest and youthful piercers into truth and reality, those horrible meanings, when first discovered, infuse their poison into a spot previously unprovided with that sovereign antidote of a sense of uncapitulatable security, which is only the possession of the furthest advanced and profoundest souls.

Judge ye, then, ye Judicious, the mood of Pierre, so far as the passage in Dante touched him.

If among the deeper significances of its pervading indefiniteness, which significances are wisely hidden from all but the rarest adepts, the pregnant tragedy of Hamlet convey any one particular moral at all fitted

to the ordinary uses of man, it is this:--that all meditation is worthless, unless it prompt to action; that it is not for man to stand shilly-shallying amid the conflicting invasions of surrounding impulses; that in the earliest instant of conviction, the roused man must strike, and, if possible, with the precision and the force of the lightning-bolt.

Pierre had always been an admiring reader of Hamlet; but neither his age nor his mental experience thus far, had qualified him either to catch initiating glimpses into the hopeless gloom of its interior meaning, or to draw from the general story those superficial and purely incidental lessons, wherein the painstaking moralist so complacently expatiates.

The intensest light of reason and revelation combined, can not shed such blazonings upon the deeper truths in man, as will sometimes proceed from his own profoundest gloom. Utter darkness is then his light, and cat-like he distinctly sees all objects through a medium which is mere blindness to common vision. Wherefore have Gloom and Grief been celebrated of old as the selectest chamberlains to knowledge? Wherefore is it, that not to know Gloom and Grief is not to know aught that an heroic man should learn?

By the light of that gloom, Pierre now turned over the soul of Hamlet in his hand. He knew not--at least, felt not--then, that Hamlet, though a thing of life, was, after all, but a thing of breath, evoked by the wanton magic of a creative hand, and as wantonly dismissed at last into



endless halls of hell and night.

It is the not impartially bestowed privilege of the more final insights, that at the same moment they reveal the depths, they do, sometimes, also reveal--though by no means so distinctly--some answering heights. But when only midway down the gulf, its crags wholly conceal the upper vaults, and the wanderer thinks it all one gulf of downward dark.

Judge ye, then, ye Judicious, the mood of Pierre, so far as the passage in Hamlet touched him.

IV.

Torn into a hundred shreds the printed pages of Hell and Hamlet lay at his feet, which trampled them, while their vacant covers mocked him with their idle titles. Dante had made him fierce, and Hamlet had insinuated that there was none to strike. Dante had taught him that he had bitter cause of quarrel; Hamlet taunted him with faltering in the fight. Now he began to curse anew his fate, for now he began to see that after all he had been finely juggling with himself, and postponing with himself, and in meditative sentimentalities wasting the moments consecrated to instant action.

Eight-and-forty hours and more had passed. Was Isabel acknowledged? Had she yet hung on his public arm? Who knew yet of Isabel but Pierre? Like

a skulking coward he had gone prowling in the woods by day, and like a skulking coward he had stolen to her haunt by night! Like a thief he had sat and stammered and turned pale before his mother, and in the cause of Holy Right, permitted a woman to grow tall and hector over him! Ah! Easy for man to think like a hero; but hard for man to act like one. All imaginable audacities readily enter into the soul; few come boldly forth from it.

Did he, or did he not vitally mean to do this thing? Was the immense stuff to do it his, or was it not his? Why defer? Why put off? What was there to be gained by deferring and putting off? His resolution had been taken, why was it not executed? What more was there to learn? What more which was essential to the public acknowledgment of Isabel, had remained to be learned, after his first glance at her first letter? Had doubts of her identity come over him to stay him?--None at all. Against the wall of the thick darkness of the mystery of Isabel, recorded as by some phosphoric finger was the burning fact, that Isabel was his sister. Why then? How then? Whence then this utter nothing of his acts? Did he stagger at the thought, that at the first announcement to his mother concerning Isabel, and his resolution to own her boldly and lovingly, his proud mother, spurning the reflection on his father, would likewise spurn Pierre and Isabel, and denounce both him and her, and hate them both alike, as unnatural accomplices against the good name of the purest of husbands and parents? Not at all. Such a thought was not in him. For had he not already resolved, that his mother should know nothing of the fact of Isabel?--But how now? What then? How was Isabel to be

acknowledged to the world, if his mother was to know nothing of that acknowledgment?--Short-sighted, miserable palterer and huckster, thou hast been playing a most fond and foolish game with thyself! Fool and coward! Coward and fool! Tear thyself open, and read there the confounding story of thy blind dotishness! Thy two grand resolutions--the public acknowledgment of Isabel, and the charitable withholding of her existence from thy own mother,--these are impossible adjuncts.--Likewise, thy so magnanimous purpose to screen thy father's honorable memory from reproach, and thy other intention, the open vindication of thy fraternalness to Isabel,--these also are impossible adjuncts. And the having individually entertained four such resolves, without perceiving that once brought together, they all mutually expire; this, this ineffable folly, Pierre, brands thee in the forehead for an unaccountable infatuate!

Well may'st thou distrust thyself, and curse thyself, and tear thy Hamlet and thy Hell! Oh! fool, blind fool, and a million times an ass! Go, go, thou poor and feeble one! High deeds are not for such blind grubs as thou! Quit Isabel, and go to Lucy! Beg humble pardon of thy mother, and hereafter be a more obedient and good boy to her, Pierre--Pierre, Pierre,--infatuate!

Impossible would it be now to tell all the confusion and confoundings in the soul of Pierre, so soon as the above absurdities in his mind presented themselves first to his combining consciousness. He would fain have disowned the very memory and the mind which produced to him such an

immense scandal upon his common sanity. Now indeed did all the fiery floods in the Inferno, and all the rolling gloom in Hamlet suffocate him at once in flame and smoke. The cheeks of his soul collapsed in him: he dashed himself in blind fury and swift madness against the wall, and fell dabbling in the vomit of his loathed identity.