

One Deep was Enough
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by
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ONE PEEP WAS ENOUGH

Painted by H. Richter Engraved by F. Bacon

ONE PEEP WAS ENOUGH;

OR, THE POST-OFFICE.

BY MISS L. E. LANDON.

ALL places have their peculiarities: now that of Dalton was discourse—that species of discourse, which Johnson's Dictionary entitles “ conversation on whatever does not concern ourselves.” Everybody knew what everybody did, and a little more. Eatings, drinkings, wakings, sleepings, walkings, talkings, sayings, doings—all were for the good of the public; there was not such a thing as a secret in the town.

There was a story of Mrs. Mary Smith, an ancient dame who lived on an annuity, and boasted the gentility of a back and front parlour, that she once asked a few friends to dinner. The usual heavy antecedent half-hour really passed quite pleasantly; for Mrs. Mary's windows overlooked the market-place, and not a scrag of mutton could leave it unobserved; so that the extravagance or the meanness of the various buyers furnished a copious theme for dialogue. Still, in spite of Mr. A.'s pair of fowls, and Mrs. B.'s round of beef, the time seemed long, and the guests found hunger growing more potent than curiosity. They waited and waited; at length the fatal discovery took place—that in the hurry of observing her neighbours' dinners, Mrs. Smith had forgotten to order her own.

It was in the month of March that an event happened which

put the whole town in a commotion—the arrival of a stranger, who took up his abode at the White Hart: not that there was any thing remarkable about the stranger; he was a plain, middle-aged, respectable-looking man, and the nicest scrutiny (and heaven knows how narrowly he was watched) failed to discover any thing odd about him. It was ascertained that he rose at eight, breakfasted at nine, ate two eggs and a piece of broiled bacon, sat in his room at the window, read a little, wrote a little, and looked out upon the road a good deal; he then strolled out, returned home, dined at five, smoked two cigars, read the Morning Herald (for the post came in of an evening), and went to bed at ten. Nothing could be more regular or unexceptionable than his habits; still it was most extraordinary what could have brought him to Dalton. There were no chalybeate-springs, warranted to cure every disease under the sun; no ruins in the neighbourhood, left expressly for antiquarians and pic-nic parties; no fine prospects, which, like music, people make it matter of conscience to admire; no celebrated person had ever been born or buried in its environs; there were no races, no assizes—in short, there was “no nothing.” It was not even summer; so country air and fine weather were not the inducements. The stranger’s name was Mr. Williams, but that was the extent of their knowledge; and shy and silent, there seemed no probability of learning any thing more from himself. Conjecture, like Shakspeare, “exhausted worlds, and then imagined new.” Some supposed he was hiding from his creditors, others that he had committed forgery; one suggested that he had escaped from a mad-house, a second that he had killed some one in a duel; but all agreed that he came there for no good.

It was the twenty-third of March, when a triad of gossips were assembled at their temple, the post-office. The affairs

of Dalton and the nation were settled together; newspapers were slipped from their covers, and not an epistle but yielded a portion of its contents. But on this night all attention was concentrated upon one, directed to "John Williams, Esq., at the White Hart, Dalton." Eagerly was it compressed in the long fingers of Mrs. Mary Smith of dinnerless memory; the fat landlady of the White Hart was on tip-toe to peep, while the post-mistress, whose curiosity took a semblance of official dignity, raised a warning hand against any overt act of violence. The paper was closely folded, and closely written in a cramped and illegible hand; suddenly Mrs. Mary Smith's look grew more intent—she had succeeded in decyphering a sentence; the letter dropped from her hand. "Oh, the monster!" shrieked the horrified peeper. Landlady and post-mistress both snatched at the terrible scroll, and they equally succeeded in reading the following words:—"We will settle the matter to-morrow at dinner, but I am sorry you persist in poisoning your wife, the horror is too great." Not a syllable more could they make out; but what they had read was enough. "He told me," gasped the landlady, "that he expected a lady and gentleman to dinner—oh the villain! to think of poisoning any lady at the White Hart; and his wife, too—I should like to see my husband poisoning me!" Our hostess became quite personal in her indignation.

"I always thought there was something suspicious about him; people don't come and live where nobody knows them, for nothing," observed Mrs. Mary Smith.

"I dare say," returned the post-mistress, "Williams is not his real name."

"I don't know that," interrupted the landlady; "Williams is a good hanging name: there was Williams who murdered the Marr's family, and Williams who burked all those poor

dear children ; I dare say he is some relation of theirs ; but to think of his coming to the White Hart—it's no place for his doings, I can tell him : he sha'n't poison his wife in my house ; out he goes this very night—I'll take the letter to him myself."

"Lord ! Lord ! I shall be ruined, if it comes to be known that we take a look into the letters ;" and the post-mistress thought in her heart that she had better let Mr. Williams poison his wife at his leisure. Mrs. Mary Smith, too, reprobated any violent measures ; the truth is, she did not wish to be mixed up in the matter ; a gentlewoman with an annuity and a front and back parlour was rather ashamed of being detected in such close intimacy with the post-mistress and the landlady. It seemed likely that poor Mrs. Williams would be left to her miserable fate.

"Murder will out," said the landlord, the following morning, as he mounted the piebald pony, which, like Tom Tough, had seen a deal of service ; and hurried off in search of Mr. Crampton, the nearest magistrate.

Their perceptions assisted by brandy and water, he and his wife had sat up long past "the witching hour of night," deliberating on what line of conduct would be most efficacious in preserving the life of the unfortunate Mrs. Williams ; and the result of their deliberation was to fetch the justice, and have the delinquent taken into custody at the very dinner-table which was intended to be the scene of his crime. "He has ordered soup to-day for the first time ; he thinks he could so easily slip poison into the liquid. There he goes ; he looks like a man who has got something on his conscience," pointing to Mr. Williams, who was walking up and down at his usual slow pace. Two o'clock arrived, and with it a hack chaise : out of it stepped, sure enough, a lady and gentleman. The land-

lady's pity redoubled—such a pretty young creature, not above nineteen!—"I see how it is," thought she, "the old wretch is jealous." All efforts to catch her eye were in vain, the dinner was ready, and down they sat. The hostess of the White Hart looked alternately out of the window, like sister Ann, to see if any one was coming, and at the table to see that nothing was doing. To her dismay she observed the young lady lifting a spoonful of broth to her mouth! She could restrain herself no longer; but catching her hand, exclaimed, "Poor dear innocent, the soup is poisoned!"—All started from the table in confusion, which was yet to be increased:—a bustle was heard in the passage, in rushed a whole party, two of whom, each catching an arm of Mr. Williams, pinioned them down to his seat. "I am happy, madam," said the little bustling magistrate, "to have been under Heaven the humble instrument of preserving your life from the nefarious designs of that disgrace to humanity." Mr. Crampton paused in consequence of three wants—want of words, breath, and ideas.

"My life!" ejaculated the astonished lady.

"Yes, madam, the ways of Providence are inscrutable—the vain curiosity of three idle women has been turned to good account." And the eloquent magistrate proceeded to detail the process of inspection to which the fatal letter had been subjected; but when he came to the terrible words—"We will settle the matter to-morrow at dinner; but I am sorry you persist in poisoning your wife"—he was interrupted by bursts of laughter from the gentleman, from the injured wife, and even from the prisoner himself. One fit of merriment was followed by another, till it became contagious, and the very constables began to laugh too.

"I can explain all," at last interrupted the visitor. "Mr. Williams came here for that quiet so necessary for the labours

of genius: he is writing a melodrame called 'My Wife'—he submitted the last act to me, and I rather objected to the poisoning of the heroine. This young lady is my daughter, and we are on our way to the sea-coast. Mr. Williams is only wedded to the Muses."

The disconcerted magistrate shook his head, and muttered something about theatres being very immoral.

"Quite mistaken, sir," said Mr. Williams. "Our soup is cold; but our worthy landlady roasts fowls to a turn—we will have them and the veal cutlets up—you will stay and dine with us—and, afterward, I shall be proud to read 'My Wife' aloud, in the hope of your approval, at least, of your indulgence"—and with the same hope, I bid farewell to my readers.
