

While I murmured in bitterness of soul at the lowness to which my family was reduced, a still heavier calamity impended, as if in vengeance against the fantastic refinements of distress over which I brooded.

I was wandering, as I had often done, with a gloomy and rebellious spirit, among the rocks, a few miles distant from the place of our habitation. It was the middle of summer. The weather had been remarkably fine; but I disdained to allow the gratifications which arise from a pure atmosphere and a serene sky to find entrance in my soul. My excursions had for some days been incessant; and the sun, which matured the corn and blackened the grapes[88] around, had imbrowned my visage, and boiled in my blood. I drank in fierceness and desperation from the fervour of his beams. One night, as in sullen mood I watched his setting from a point of the rock, I perceived the clearness of the day subsiding in a threatening evening. The clouds gathered in the west; and, as night approached, were overspread with a deep dye of the fiercest crimson. The wind rose; and, during the hours of darkness, its roarings were hollow and tempestuous.

In the morning the clouds were hurried rapidly along, and the air was changed from a long series of sultriness to a nipping cold. This change of the atmosphere I disregarded, and pursued my rambles. A little before noon, however, the air suddenly grew so dark, as to produce a sensation perfectly tremendous. I felt as if the darkest night had never exceeded it. The impetuous motion to which I had been impelled, partly by the fever in my blood, and partly by the turbulence of the season, was suspended. Mechanically I looked round me for shelter. But I could ill distinguish the objects that were near me, when a flash of lightning, blue and sulphureous, came directly in my face, with a brightness that threatened to extinguish the organ of vision. The thunder that followed was of a length and loudness to admit of no comparison from any object with which I am acquainted. The bursts were so frequent as almost to confound themselves with each other. At present I thought only of myself; and the recent habits of my mind were not calculated to make me peculiarly accessible to fear. I stood awe-struck; but rather with the awe that inheres to a cultivated imagination, than that which consists in apprehension. I seemed ready to mount amidst the clouds, and penetrate the veil with which nature conceals her operations. I would have plunged into the recesses in which the storm was engendered, and bared my bosom to the streaming fire. Meanwhile my thoughts were solemnised and fixed by observing the diversified dance of the lightnings upon the points of the rocks, contrasting as they did in the strongest manner with the darkness in which the rest of the scene was enveloped. This added contention of the elements did not, however, suspend the raging[89] of the wind. Presently a storm of mingled hail and rain poured from the clouds, and was driven with inconceivable impetuosity. The hailstones were of so astonishing a magnitude, that, before I was aware, I was beaten by them to the ground. Not daring to attempt to rise again, I simply endeavoured to place myself in such a manner as might best protect me from their violence. I therefore remained prostrate, listening to the force with which they struck upon the earth, and feeling the rebound of their blows from different parts of my body.

In about twenty minutes the shower abated, and in half an hour was entirely over. When I began to move, I was surprised at the sensation of soreness which I felt in every part of me. I raised myself upon my elbow, and saw the hailstones, in some places lying in heaps like hillocks of ice, while in others they had ploughed up the surface, and buried themselves in the earth. As I looked further, I perceived immense trees torn from their roots, and thrown to a great distance upon the declivity. To the noise that they made in their descent, which must have been astonishingly great, I had been at the time insensible. Such were the marks which the tempest had left upon the mountains. In the plain it was still worse. I could perceive the soil for long spaces together converted into a morass, the standing corn beaten down and buried in the mud, the vines torn into a thousand pieces, the fruit trees demolished, and even in some places the animals themselves, lambs, sheep, and cows, strewing the fields with their mangled carcasses. The whole hopes of the year over which my eyes had glanced a few minutes before, for it was near the period of harvest, were

converted into the most barren and dreary scene that any quarter of the globe ever witnessed. I was mounted upon a considerable eminence, and had an extensive prospect of this horrible devastation. As I stood gazing in mute astonishment, suddenly a fear came over me that struck dampness to my very heart. What was the situation of my own family and their little remaining property, amidst this dreadful ruin? I was in a position where, though I nearly faced our habitation, a point of the rock intercepted it from my sight. The obstacle^[90] was but a small one, yet it would require a considerable circuit to overcome. I flew along the path with a speed that scarcely permitted me to breathe. When I had passed the upper rock, the whole extensive scene opened upon me in an instant. What were my sensations, when I perceived that the devastation had been even more complete here than on the side where I first viewed it! My own cottage in particular, which that very morning had contained, and I hoped continued to contain, all that was most dear to my heart, seemed to stand an entire solitude in the midst of an immense swamp.

Marguerite, whose idea, upon our retreat into Switzerland, had been that of conforming without reserve to the new situation that was allotted us, had immediately expended the whole of what remained from the shipwreck of our fortune, in the purchase of the cottage in which we dwelt, and small portion of land around it, sufficient with economy for the support of our family. Under her direction the hills had been covered with vines, and the fields with corn. She had purchased cows to furnish us with milk, and sheep with their fleeces, and had formed her establishment upon the model of the Swiss peasantry in our neighbourhood. Reverting to the simplicity of nature, appeared to her like building upon an immovable basis, which the clash of nations could not destroy, and which was too humble to fear the treachery of courts, or the caprice of artificial refinement.

It was all swept away in a moment. Our little property looked as if it had been particularly a mark for the vengeance of Heaven, and was more utterly destroyed than any of the surrounding scenes. There was not a tree left standing; there was not a hedge or a limit that remained within or around it; chaos had here resumed his empire, and avenged himself of the extraordinary order and beauty it had lately displayed.

I was not overwhelmed with this astonishing spectacle. At that moment nature found her way to my heart, and made a man of me. I made light of these petty accessories of our existence; and the thought of my wife and my children, simply as they were in themselves, filled every^[91] avenue of my heart. For them, and them alone, I was interested: it was a question for their lives. To conceive what they might personally have sustained was a horror that seemed to freeze up all the arteries of my heart. I descended from the mountain. It was with the greatest difficulty, and not without many circuitous deviations, that I proceeded; so much was the surface changed, and so deep and miry the swamps. My terror increased, as I passed near to the carcasses of the animals who had fallen victims to this convulsion of the elements. I observed, with inconceivable alarm, that the dead or wounded bodies of some human beings were intermingled with the brute destruction. I stayed not to enquire whether they were yet in a state to require assistance; the idea that had taken possession of me left no room for the sentiment of general humanity.

A little further on I distinctly remarked the body of a woman at some distance from any habitation, who appeared to be dead, destroyed by the storm. Near her lay a female infant, apparently about six years of age. My attention was involuntarily arrested; I thought of Louisa, that sweet and amiable child, so like her admirable mother. The figure was hers; the colour of the robe corresponded to that in which I last saw her. The child was lying on her face. With all the impatient emotions of a father, I stooped down. I turned over the body, that I might identify my child. It was still warm; life had scarcely deserted it. I gazed upon the visage; it was distorted with the agonies of death: but enough to convince me still remained discernible; it was not Louisa!

I can scarcely recollect a period through all the strange vicissitudes of my existence to be compared with this. If I had not felt what I then felt, I could never have conceived it. Human nature is so constituted, that the highest degree of anguish, an anguish in which the heart stretches itself to take in the mightiness of its woe, can be felt but for a few instants. When the calamity we feared is already arrived, or when the expectation of it is so certain as to shut out hope, there seems to be a principle within us by which we look with misanthropic composure on the state[92] to which we are reduced, and the heart sullenly contracts and accommodates itself to what it most abhorred. Our hopes wither; and our pride, our self-complacence, all that taught us to rejoice in existence, wither along with them. But, when hope yet struggles with despair, or when the calamity abruptly announces itself, then is the true contention, the tempest and uproar of the soul too vast to be endured.

This sentiment of ineffable wretchedness I experienced, when I stooped down over the body of the imaginary Louisa, and when I hastened to obtain the certainty which was of all things most terrible to me. The termination of such a moment of horror is scarcely less memorable than its intrinsic greatness. In an instant the soul recovers its balance, and the thought is as if it has never been. I clapped my hands in an ecstasy at once of joy and astonishment, so sure did I seem to have made myself of my misfortune; I quitted the body with an unburdened heart; I flew towards my home, that I might ascertain whether I was prematurely speaking comfort to my spirit.

At length I reached it. I saw the happy group assembled at the door. Marguerite had entertained the same terrors for me, with which I had myself so lately been impressed. We flew into each other's arms. She hid her face in my neck, and sobbed audibly. I embraced each of the children in turn, but Louisa with the most heartfelt delight. "Are you safe, papa?"—"Are you safe, my child?" were echoed on every side. A spectator, unacquainted with what was passing in our hearts, would certainly have stood astonished to see the transport with which we exulted, surrounded as we were with desolation and ruin.

After an interval, however, we opened our eyes, and began to ruminate upon the new condition in which we were placed. Marguerite and myself watched each other's countenances with anxiety, to discover what were likely to be the feelings of either in this terrible crisis. "Be of good heart, my love," said Marguerite; "do not suffer the accident which has happened entirely to overcome you." There was a mixed compassion, tenderness, and anxiety in the tone of voice with which she uttered these words, that was inexpressibly delightful. [93]

"No, Marguerite," replied I, with enthusiastic impetuosity, "I am not cast down; I never shall be cast down again. Ruin is nothing to me, so long as I am surrounded with you and our dear children. I have for some time been a fool. In the midst of every real blessing, I have fashioned for myself imaginary evils. But my eyes are now opened. How easily is the human mind induced to forget those benefits with which we are constantly surrounded, and our possession of which we regard as secure! The feelings of this morning have awakened me. I am now cured of my folly. I have learned to value my domestic blessings as I ought. Having preserved them, I esteem myself to have lost nothing. What are gold and jewels and precious utensils? Mere dross and dirt. The human face and the human heart, reciprocations of kindness and love, and all the nameless sympathies of our nature,—these are the only objects worth being attached to. What are rank and station?—the homage of the multitude and the applause of fools. Let me judge for myself! The value of a man is in his intrinsic qualities; in that of which power cannot strip him, and which adverse fortune cannot take away. That for which he is indebted to circumstances, is mere trapping and tinsel. I should love these precious and ingenuous creatures before me better, though in rags, than the children of kings in all the pomp of ornament. I am proud to be their father. Whatever may be my personal faults, the world is my debtor for having been the occasion of their existence. But they are endeared to me by a better principle than pride. I love them for their qualities. He that loves, and is loved by, a race of

pure and virtuous creatures, and that lives continually in the midst of them, is an idiot, if he does not think himself happy. Surrounded as I am now surrounded, I feel as irremovable as the pillars of creation. Nothing that does not strike at their existence can affect me with terror.”

Marguerite viewed me with surprise and joy. “Now indeed,” said she, “you are the man I took you for, and the man I shall henceforth be prouder than ever to call my husband. The sorrow in which you lately indulged was a luxury; and we must have done with luxuries. You will be our protector and our support.” [94]

Thus saying, she took me by the hand, and motioned me to view with her the devastation that had been committed. There was one path I had discovered, in which we might proceed some way with tolerable ease. The scene was terrible. We were indeed beggars. A whole province had been destroyed: all the corn and the fruits of the earth; most of the trees; in many places cattle; in some places men. Persons who had been rich in the morning saw all the produce of their fields annihilated, and were unable even to guess by what process fertility was to be re-established. The comparatively wealthy scarcely knew how they were to obtain immediate subsistence; the humbler class, who always live by the expedients of the day, saw nothing before them but the prospect of perishing with hunger. We witnessed, in one or two instances, the anguish of their despair.

Our prospect was scarcely in any respect better than theirs; yet we felt differently. We were more impressed with the joy of our personal escape. As my error respecting the value of externals had been uncommonly great, the sudden revolution of opinion I experienced was equally memorable. The survey, indeed, that we took of the general distress somewhat saddened our hearts; but the sadness it gave was that of sobriety, not of dejection.

[...]

William Godwin, *St Leon*, Ch. VIII, London 1831 [1799]

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