

Lady Audrey Leigh.

"A FEW weeks ago, in clearing out the ruins of an old chapel at Nuneham Regis, in Warwickshire, we thought it necessary to trench the whole space. . . . We began to trench at the west end, and came on a great many bones and skeletons, from which the coffins had crumbled away. . . . As soon as the leaden top was rolled back, a most overpowering aromatic smell diffused itself all over the place. . . . On trenching towards the chancel we came on four leaden coffins laid side by side, with inscriptions on each. . . . We opened the coffin of Lady Audrey Leigh, and found her perfectly embalmed and in entire preservation, her flesh quite plump as if she were alive, her face very beautiful, her hands exceedingly small, and not wasted. She was dressed in fine linen trimmed all over with old point lace, and two rows of lace were laid flat across her forehead. She looked exactly as if she were lying asleep, and seemed not more than sixteen or seventeen years old; her beauty was very great; even her eye-lashes and eye-brows were quite perfect, and her eyes were closed; no part of her face or figure was at all fallen in. The date on the coffin was 1640."—*Notes and Queries*, vol. vi. no. 156, p. 386.

LADY AUDREY LEIGH.

I.

THEY have lifted the lid
From the mould'ring coffin—and what was there?
Noble and young and passing fair,
White-robed she lay, and cushion'd amid
Perfume and faded flow'rs, which spread
An odorous veil o'er the long-housed dead.

Deeply we gazed : it was strange to see
The brows of that living company
Bent upon one who had not grown
Older in twice a century flown ;
Whose life had set while it still was morn,
Long ere their fathers' sires were born.

Slightly her eyelash stirr'd to the breath
Of the close-set faces stooping round ;
And calm lay her features and cold, beneath
Torch-light and hammer with flash and sound,
And but for this you had deem'd her then
A sleeping child of those rugged men.

Deeply we gazed ; and on and on,
Musing, I look'd when the rest were gone.
It seem'd as if Death had arrested there
His pitiless touch from a form so fair,
And had let her lie, with the delicate clasp
Of her fingers, bent as in friendly grasp ;
While two white fillets of ancient lace
Banded the brow of that beautiful face !
" Thou dead ! It cannot be !" I cried,
" Wake, lady ! wake ! and side by side,
We will wander to see what change hath past
O'er the sleepless world since thou saw'st it last."

Merciful angels ! or hath my brain
Thought until vision is weak and vain ?
Or doth the fluttering torch-light flash
From a gather'd tear on that long eyelash ?

And was it my own voice sounding nigh ?

Oh ! surely there must be life to sigh !

I turn'd for awhile, but when I gazed

Once more, the head of the dead was raised,

And my heart's blood shrank to its fount to see

That young eye open, and look upon me !

She rose—she stood—then approach'd me near

With silent motion, and took my hand—

That touch of gentleness soothed my fear,

Which grew to joy, as I seem'd to hear

“ A Pow'r which the grave may not withstand

Hath raised me up from its quiet home,

With thee through the sleepless world to roam.”

II.

We stood within a stately hall ;

From spreading glass and gilded wall

The lamp-rays shot their myriad glances,

As, circling, swept in busy dances

The idlers of the ball.

Through flowery arch and warm saloon,

Floated melodious clouds of tune.

Joy seem'd to reign where all went well,

And bosoms heaved as footsteps fell !

Alone we stood ; no foot, no voice
 Or ceased to move, or to rejoice :
 Nor rose one whisper to discuss
 “ Why hath he brought the dead to us ? ”

I turn'd to my companion—she
 Look'd up in quiet grief and said,
 “ How happier are the unmoving dead !
 This is no place for me.
 Let my heavy eyelids close ;
 Take me back to my repose.”

III.

Again I took her, 'mid the things
 Of modern life, the dead
 To mingle with the living, where
 To waft the way-farer through air
 The Genius of Invention spread
 His vast and vapoury wings.
 From town to town, from mart to mart,
 Like Nature's lightning mock'd by art,
 We sped impetuous on—
 View'd mighty ports where ships unfurl'd
 Their sails, the envoys to a world
 From Commerce' golden throne ;

Or bustling wealth bid ever rise
Its growing temple to the skies.

She shrank within herself—her look
Was one of timid sorrow, cast
In wishes for a trial past :
Her body trembled, as the din
Of the world, iron-throated, shook
Her peaceful soul within !
“ Let, O let my eyelids close ;
Take me back to my repose.”

IV.

Again, we hasten'd where the air
Was cleft by thousand voices crying,
Above the cannons roaring there,
Far o'er the groans of many dying—
In shouts that made the distance ring,
“ The king ! the king ! Long live the king ! ”
Erect the crownèd victor stood,
And on his star-emblazon'd breast
The purple hid the tide of blood
That bore him to that height ;
It hid the long and lean unrest,
That wore him, day and night.

Yet, 'twas a scene of pow'r to please ;
The banner stretching to the breeze,
 The cry of joy, the rush of speed,
Bright armour flashing to the sun
The augury of a reign begun,
 The rivalry of man and steed,
The champ, the neighing, and the shout ;
 While still, at every close,
Like a check'd fountain bursting out,
 The brazen music rose.

Her cheek alone was pale ; her heart was cold :
 O'er the large orbs their sable lashes drooping,
 Seem'd to betray how life within was stooping
To find escape from matter's forceful hold,
While o'er the marble lips there past a quiv'ring,
From which the words came feebly, shorn and shiv'ring,
 " Let my heavy eyelids close ;
 Take me back to my repose !"

v.

Above us rose a lofty dome
O'er-topping many a learned tome,
As if long-labouring art had wrought
A very palace-hall for thought !

Imaginations of all ages
Breathed silently from countless pages,
And gentle fancy, never dead,
Her wings in graceful beauty spread.

I gazed around with curious look,
And saw where in a quiet nook,
With furry robe and furrow'd brow,
—'Twas thus since he was young till now—
An old man and alone,
As willing here his world to find,
Sat calmly like the king of mind,
Upon his letter'd throne.

No word my youthful partner spoke,
But meekly shook her drooping head ;
While o'er her pallid features broke
The language of a look, which said
That wish for earthly wisdom stirs
No motion in a soul like hers !

VI.

We sat upon a quiet bank, alone
By shaded waters ; and I asked 'her then,
With something of a disappointed tone,

“Lady! what are the joys thou rather choosest?
What is *that* life for which thou still refusest
To mix, well-pleased, amid thy fellow-men?”
For the first time her eye-ball’s solemn show
Grew warm with feeling, and her cheek was tinged
By various hues, as if a rainbow fringed
With its bright stripes a plain of Arctic snow.

“Oh! there my life is sweet,” she cried,
“Far sweeter than my words can say,
To wait, as might some sleeping bride,
The dawn that brings a greater day.
That life (if such to thee might seem
The sense of an unworldly dream)
Is, as the peace-pervaded soul
Were rock’d in a voluptuous motion
Upon the fondling depths of ocean,
Still drawing nearer to the goal
Of a dim shore, where Hope may hint
A balmier air, a brighter tint;
But, clearly, through its shadows seen
No feature meets the eye to break
The film of bliss that floats between
This present world, and when shall wake

The spirit, born no more to die,
And married into ecstasy !

“ Sometimes I feel as I were rushing
 Upon a mighty danger, when
There comes a mightier comfort gushing
 Through every pore of self, and then
Anticipated victory eases
The peril into pain that pleases.

“ At times I feel about to sink
 In gloomy water, down and down,
Pull'd back by heavy hands, and think,
 ‘ There must be help—I shall not drown !’
A cross of wood comes floating nigh,
 On which I mount, and as I go,
Shake off the baffled clutch below,
And look well-pleased upon the sky !

“ But, more than all, far more than all,
 I see a face bend down to mine—
 To say its Beauty is divine
Were nothing ; and it then lets fall
From its eternal eyes, a flood

Of love, so sorrowful yet deep,
That I spring up, as I would steep
My soul therein ; and then comes blood
From its crown'd brow—a thorny crown—
Dropping, dropping, solemnly down.
What feel I then as that red flow
Streams on me ? A strange heart and mind
As I myself were all mankind,
And man—but words are vain to show
That awful joy ! Oh ! let me go,
Renewing bliss that will but end
In greater bliss—O cruel friend !
Let my heavy eyelids close ;
Take me back to my repose !”

VII.

Once more, we stood beneath a lowly roof
Where decent taste and pride strove hard to keep
The dust and rags of poverty aloof,
And tried to smile, but only turn'd to weep.
On a rude chair there sat to write
One, on whose form her widow's dress,
Hung like the shadow of the night
Upon her morning loveliness ;

And by her side, fresh-open'd there,
 Upon the table's humble deal,
A pleasant letter written fair,
 With coronetted seal.

And as she wrote, she turn'd her head
 Where a young infant lay,
 With large mild eyes like quiet day,
On the brown-quilted bed.
It look'd not strong as mother's glance
 Should find it—Who can guess
The cause? 'Twas sickness—or perchance
 Its little food was less—
And then it seem'd in pain,—altho'
Its cry, if ever heard, was low.

She wrote and look'd, and sigh'd and wrote,
And trembling closed the blotted note ;
And then she knelt, and raised on high
The tearful beauty of her eye,
 And pray'd to have a better will,
To choose the pure and purse-poor station—
“ Oh ! lead us not into temptation !
 Deliver us from ill ! ”

VIII.

The fair companion by my side
Gazed deep and sobbingly, and cried,
"Here will I stay! Life *here* were worth
A long retaste of bitter earth—
To live for good, to lift a soul,
To draw it nearer to that goal
Where I—but wherefore didst thou speak?"
"I spoke not," I replied—her cheek
Grew pale again; and then—"I caught
A whisper'd voice—'twas thine, I thought;
But ah! it was my warning fate,
'Too late,' it cried, 'it is too late!
Pray only that the thoughts may be
In living hearts which burn in thee!
Oh! may they! may they! Now again
I die to earthly joy and pain.
I feel as if my fleeting soul
Were spreading strongly through the whole
Of all created Life, and yet,
There lurks a sense that can't forget
Itself; a ray that mixes with the sun;
One ranging through the whole—the whole
encircling one!

Oh ! Love ! great Love !"—then, as a child rejoices
To visit home, she pass'd ; and the sad air
Kiss'd from her lips those last sweet words, and bare
" Oh ! Love ! great Love !" around in myriads of
small voices.

IX.

And next, I stood alone, as on my view
Her words and figure faded off together,
And I but heard the voice of the rough weather,
And saw the sky stretch out its solitary blue.

And oft I wander by the drowsy brink
Of melancholy streams, or through the wood
Of slumbering forests ; and in sadness think
Of that—more felt perchance than understood—
That glorious vision ! and then I
Sigh—is it sinful so to sigh ?
That unto me were giv'n
A better life, or other birth ;
To wed with such a soul on earth,
Or look on it in heav'n !