

CHAPTER XV.

A CALIFORNIA PIC-NIC.—SEVENTY AND SEVENTEEN IN THE DANCE.—CHILDREN IN THE GROVE.—A CALIFORNIA BEAR-HUNT.—THE BEAR AND BULL BATED.—THE RUSSIAN'S CABBAGE HEAD.

WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 22. The lovers of rural pastimes were on an early stir this morning with their pic-nic preparations. Basket after basket, freighted with ham, poultry, game, pies, and all kinds of pastry, took their course in the direction of a wood which stands three miles from town, and shades a sloping cove in the strand of the sea. The sky was without a cloud, and the brooding fog had lifted its dusky wings from the face of the bright waters. At every door the impatient steed, gayly caparisoned, was waiting his rider. Into the saddle youth and age vaulted together, while the araba rolled forward with its living freight of laughing childhood. The dogs swept on before, barking in chorus, and flaring the gay ribbon which some happy child had fastened round the neck.

This mingled tide of health and social gladness flowed on to the grove of pine and birch, which threw their branching arms in a verdant canopy over a plat of green grass, which had been shorn close to the level earth. Around this arena strayed every variety of twig-inwoven seat, where matron and maiden, in



A California party on a Pic-nic excursion.

the flow of the heart, forgot their disparity of years. The children wreathed each other's locks with coronals of flowers, the soft breeze whispered in the pines, and the little billow murmured its music on the strand. And now the violin, the harp, and guitar woke the bounding dance. Forth upon the green the man of seventy, still erect and tall, led the blooming girl of sixteen. Age had whitened his locks, but the light of an unclouded spirit still rolled in his eye, and the salient bound of youth still dwelt in his limbs. His young partner, with her tresses of raven darkness, inwoven with snow-white flowers,—with a cheek, where the mantling tide of health was curbed into a blush—and a step light and elastic as that of the gazelle, seemed as one of Flora's train, just lighted there to swim in youth and beauty in the wild woodland merriment. By the side of these, others, in mingled youth and age, lead down the double files, and balance and whirl in the mazy measures which roll from the orchestral band. As these retire, others still spring to the arena, and the dance goes on, ever changing, and still the same. No faltering step delays its feathered feet, no glance of envy disturbs its love-lit smiles, no look of clouded care overshadows its real mirth:

“The garlands, the rose-odors, and the flowers,
The sparkling eyes, and flashing ornaments,
The white arms and the raven hair, the braids
And bracelets, swan-like bosoms, the thin robes
Floating like light clouds 'twixt our gaze and heaven.”

And now they glide to the tables, which stretch away under the embowering trees, and where the rich larder has emptied its choicest stores. There the savory venison scents the still air, and the wild strawberries blush between the green leaves. There the domestic fowl, the swift-footed hare, and the timid quail have met in strange brotherhood. There the juice of the native grape, and the cool wave of the gushing rock, sparkle in the flowing goblet. These were discussed, and the festive board was relinquished to the children, who were too full of glee to note if aught more than the fruit and confectionery remained. The ripe berry sought in vain to add color to their lips, or rival the bloom which lent its rosy hue to the round cheek. Golden locks floated around eyes which sparkled with light and love, and the accents of gladness rung out in joyous peals, like the song of birds when the storm-cloud has passed.

"Theirs was the shout! the song! the burst of joy!
Which sweet from childhood's rosy lip resoundeth;
Theirs was the eager spirit naught could cloy,
And the glad heart from which all grief reboundeth."

The music from the harp and guitar streamed out again, and the green plat was full of glancing forms, where youth and age, maternal dignity and maiden charms, led down the merry dance. As these glided to their seats, childhood crowned with wild-flowers sprung to the arena, with motions light as the measures through which it whirled its infantile forms. A

sylvan Pan might have fancied his fays had left their green-wood covert to frolic on the green beneath the soft light of the dying day. But ere the evening star ascended its watchtower the merry groups were on their fleet steeds, bounding over hill and valley to their homes. The shadows of the moonlit trees fell in softness and silence where all this mirth had been; only the silver tones of the streamlets were heard as they murmured their music in the ear of night. The echoes of our voices will all cease in the places that have known us as we glide at last to the "dim bourn," nor will a leaflet tremble long in the breath of memory. The myriads who people the past are still, the stir of their existence is over, the great ocean of their being is at rest. The wandering wind only sighs over their tombless repose.

FRIDAY, OCT. 10. Captain Hull, who has been out here nearly four years in command of the Warren, left us to-day for the United States. He has rendered good service to the country during his long exile. May prosperous breezes waft him safely to his distant home. Lieut. J. B. Lanman succeeds to the command of the Warren; an officer justly esteemed for his gentlemanly deportment and professional intelligence. It is this foreign duty that puts the competency and fidelity of an officer to the test. It is easy to carry on duty at a navy yard, but duty on board ship with a heterogeneous crew, is another thing; it calls for the last resources of the officer,

in the maintenance of discipline, harmony, and efficiency.

For a person who has been but a few months in a man-of-war, and never been at sea in any other situation, to attempt to enlighten the public on the discipline of the navy, or any of the duties which belong on board ship, is an exhibition of impertinent vanity. He has no practical knowledge of the subjects upon which he is delivering his sage lecture. He has a certain theory with which he proposes to test the wisdom or folly, the humanity or cruelty, of every thing in the service; and when this theory gets snagged, which is often the case, he is for rooting out the whole concern. He don't reflect that his land theory is as much out of its element at sea as a stranded porpoise would be out of his. All the habits and usages of a man-of-war, are heaven wide of those which obtain on land. They require rules and regulations suited to their genius. Reforms must necessarily be of slow growth; they must take root in the service itself, and not in the novelties of any land theory.

THURSDAY, OCT. 28. The king of all field-sports in California is the bear-hunt: I determined to witness one, and for this purpose joined a company of native gentlemen bound out on this wild amusement. All were well mounted, armed with rifles and pistols, and provided with lassoes. A ride of fifteen miles among the mountain crags, which frown in stern wildness

over the tranquil beauty of Monterey, brought us to a deserted shanty, in the midst of a gloomy forest of cypress and oak. In a break of this swinging gloom lay a natural pasture, isled in the centre by a copse of willows and birch, and on which the sunlight fell. This, it was decided, should be the arena of the sport: a wild bullock was now shot, and the quarters, after being trailed around the copse, to scent the bear, were deposited in its shade. The party now retired to the shanty, where our henchman tumbled from his panniers several rolls of bread, a boiled ham, and a few bottles of London porter. These discussed, and our horses tethered, each wrapped himself in his blanket, and with his saddle for his pillow, rolled down for repose.

At about twelve o'clock of the night our watch came into camp and informed us that a bear had just entered the copse. In an instant each sprung to his feet and into the saddle. It was a still, cloudless night, and the moonlight lay in sheets on rivulet, rock, and plain. We proceeded with a cautious, noiseless step, through the moist grass of the pasture to the copse in its centre, where each one took his station, forming a cordon around the little grove. The horse was the first to discover, through the glimmering shade, the stealthful movements of his antagonist. His ears were thrown forward, his nostrils distended, his breathing became heavy and oppressed, and his large eye was fixed immovably on the dim form of the savage animal. Each rider now uncoiled

his lasso from its loggerhead, and held it ready to spring from his hand, like a hooped serpent from the brake. The bear soon discovered the trap that had been laid for him; plunged from the thicket, broke through the cordon, and was leaping, with giant bounds, over the cleared plot for the dark covert of the forest beyond. A shout arose—a hot pursuit followed, and lasso after lasso fell in curving lines around the bear, till at last one looped him around the neck and brought him to a momentary stand.

As soon as bruin felt the lasso, he growled his defiant thunder, and sprung in rage at the horse. Here came in the sagacity of that noble animal. He knew, as well as his rider, that the safety of both depended on his keeping the lasso taught, and without the admonitions of rein or spur, bounded this way and that, to the front or rear, to accomplish his object, never once taking his eye from the ferocious foe, and ever in an attitude to foil his assaults. The bear, in desperation, seized the lasso in his griping paws, and hand over hand drew it into his teeth: a moment more and he would have been within leaping distance of his victim; but the horse sprung at the instant, and, with a sudden whirl, tripped the bear and extricated the lasso. At this crowning feat the horse fairly danced with delight. A shout went up which seemed to shake the wild-wood with its echoes. The bear plunged again, when the lasso slipped from its loggerhead, and bruin was instantly leaping over the field to reach his jungle. The horse, without spur or

rein, dashed after him. While his rider, throwing himself over his side, and hanging there like a lamp-reel to a flying sturgeon, recovered his lasso, bruin was brought up again all standing, more frantic and furious than before; while the horse pranced and curveted around him like a savage in his death-dance over his doomed captive. In all this no overpowering torture was inflicted on old bruin, unless it were through his own rage,—which sometimes towers so high he drops dead at your feet. He was now lassoed to a sturdy oak, and wound so closely to its body by riata over riata, as to leave him no scope for breaking or grinding off his clankless chain; though his struggles were often terrific as those of Laocoon, in the resistless folds of the serpent.

This accomplished, the company retired again to the shanty, but in spirits too high and noisy for sleep. Day glimmered, and four of the baccaros started off for a wild bull, which they lassoed out of a roving herd, and in a few hours brought into camp, as full of fury as the bear. Bruin was now cautiously unwound, and stood front to front with his horned antagonist. We retreated on our horses to the rim of a large circle, leaving the arena to the two monarchs of the forest and field. Conjectures went wildly round on the issue, and the excitement became momentarily more intense. They stood motionless, as if lost in wonder and indignant astonishment at this strange encounter. Neither turned from the other his blazing eyes; while menace and defiance began to lower

in the looks of each. Gathering their full strength, the terrific rush was made: the bull missed, when the bear, with one enormous bound, dashed his teeth into his back to break the spine; the bull fell, but whirled his huge horn deep into the side of his antagonist. There they lay, grappled and gored, in their convulsive struggles and death-throes. We spurred up, and with our rifles and pistols closed the tragedy; and it was time: this last scene was too full of blind rage and madness even for the wild sports of a California bear-hunt.

TUESDAY, NOV. 2. Byron says, a hog in a high wind is a poetical object. Had he lived here, he might have put a mischievous boy on the top of that grotesque animal, and it would have helped out the poetical image immensely. The boys here begin their equestrianism on the back of a hog or bullock, and end it on the saddle, to which they seem to grow, like a muscle to a rock.

WEDNESDAY, NOV. 3. A Russian, who carries on a farm at Santa Cruz, called at my office a few days since, and presented me with a cabbage-head. I was sure from this garden gift, the old Cossack had something in tow yet out of sight; but it soon came in the shape of a request that I would summon a debtor of his, and order payment.

The creditor of the Russian proved to be a young Frenchman, who had run away with the old man's

daughter, married her, and then quartered himself and wife on her father. I told the Frenchman he must pay board, or run away again with his wife; but if he came back he must satisfy arrears: so he concluded to run. This running before the honeymoon is pleasant enough; but running after that sweet orb has waned, is rather a dismal business.

Col. Burton, with his command, is in Lower California, where he has maintained the flag against desperate odds. His officers and men have acquitted themselves with honor. The powder and ball of the enemy were smuggled in by an American—a wretch who ought to be shot himself.

MONDAY, NOV. 8. After being six months without rain, the first shower of the season fell this evening. Its approach had been announced for several days by a dim atmosphere, which was filled with a soft, thick vapor, that swung about, like a limitless cloud. The rain itself was warm, and sunk into the earth, like flattery into the heart of a fool.

