

II.

OUR garden lies upon the southern hill-side, convenient to the house, and from its favorable exposure must be an early one. A wide border of lilacs and syringas mingled with lesser shrubs and plants, divides it from the lawn and serves as a screen to veil from the house our prospective cabbage and potato patches, which are not very ornamental appendages. To the east of the garden is a small peach orchard, which now gives promise of an abundant crop, notwithstanding the late April frosts. Skirting the orchard is a long range of trellises, covered with wide-spreading grape vines, at which Teddy the gardener has lately been busy with his pruning knife and bass strings. They look dry and lifeless now, those interwoven and errant branches; but soon the sweet juices coursing through them, will swell their latent buds, the germs of shoots, whose pendant clusters the September sun shall warm and ripen.

As I came out on the piazza before breakfast this morning, to snuff the pure air, I perceived the fragrance of freshly-turned earth, and soon descried Teddy in his shirt sleeves, delving away in the garden with

might and main. It was a pleasant sight and a "goodlye smell" too, furnishing a provocation to my matinal appetite which Lucullus might have envied. Oh, ye denizens of the city, inhaling an atmosphere heavy with smoke and dust, the wear and tear of life, little do ye know the blessedness and healthfulness of our rural airs!

So Teddy dug all the day, and I raked off a bed for our first sowing of lettuce and peas, which may escape the occasional night frosts. My fair cousin Blanche is out on the lawn near by, equipped with scissors and cord, clipping off the dead shoots from the rose-bushes and tying up their refractory branches: another one still is sitting in the sunshine not far distant, weaving airy ladders for wild creepers to climb and mantle the dead maple that stands by the garden gate. Oh, my Minnie, thought I, true to your woman nature, so would you veil from the world, as your loved but unsightly tree, man's often failings and infirmities! By and by, the lighter tasks of my companions are finished, and they stroll towards the river to watch the fishermen draw in their shad nets, the first they have set this season. But on the porch I hear the patter of little feet endeavoring to follow the two well-known forms that are disappearing over the knoll; this however is quickly stopped by ever-watchful Bridget, who is not quite ready to take Birdie his daily walk. My labors

are not quite over, for I have to manufacture a ladder, that I may attach to the maple that cunning device over which its leafy shroud is to gather and thicken. Then there are some loose pickets wanting a nail on the garden fence, and after that, there are letters to be written for the city mail, and so the morning wears away.

Then comes dinner, and after it an hour's reading for the sake of wholesome digestion, before I saddle old Charley to ride four miles to the post office over the eastern hills. Blanche proposes I should send Teddy to-day, for the roads are not settled yet and I cannot go faster than a walk ; but I divine her motive when I remember that it is Wednesday, when she never fails to receive a very suspicious-looking, daintily-sealed envelope, containing four or more pages of closely-written lines ; but pretending not to fathom her innocent sophistry, I prefer going and draw my inference from the sequel. When I emerge from the gravelled lane I find the road bad enough and am almost persuaded to return, but then Blanche would clap her hands and think how nicely she had outwitted her "shrewd cousin," as she often calls me. So I keep on and arrive at Hillsdale in a sorry plight. There I discover that Charley has left a shoe some where in the mud, and he must stand at the blacksmith's for half an hour. There is a letter for Blanche

in the post office and a packet of papers for me, with a letter well covered with European post-marks ; it is dated, Venice, March —, and has been only thirty days coming, thanks to Collins' enterprise. The superscription is in a familiar hand-writing, that of Blanche's brother, my familiar friend. I put it in my pocket unopened, to be read by our evening fire. The papers are interesting with details of the Revolution in Paris, and I sit down to read them whilst Charley is being shod.

It is sun down when I reach our gate, and as I look upward, I see Minnie and Blanche in the arbor on the knoll, waving their handkerchiefs at my return. Birdie is there too, and I know he has been watching for "his ship" to emerge from the Highlands, the ship which his nurse tells him will bring the long talked-of pony. How unshadowed is childhood's faith and hopefulness ! Yes, my child, your pony will come, but that fabled ship, like ours, is moored on viewless waters beside aerial castles, nor freighted yet with the wealth that lies beneath their "pleasure domes !" We all meet at the house, and Blanche getting the letter, saunters away to read it, her sunny face beaming with pleasure ; whilst I, wearied after my ride, lounge upon the sofa and frolic with Birdie till Bridget takes him away for the night. Tea over, that genial cup so grateful to the weary, abused by Hanway and defended

by Johnson, we gather round the fire, not a dead, dry grate-confined fire, though the house is modern built, but a kindling, flashing blaze of old hickory, diffusing its moist warmth into every corner and lighting up the study, so that the reading lamp is fairly dimmed. When the flame is brightest, I take from my pocket Frank's travel-soiled letter, the first we have had from him since the scrawl he sent by a stray pilot-boat coming homeward. Thus he writes with all the warmth of an out-gushing, imaginative spirit:

"Harry, Minnie, Blanche,—I am in Venice, the city of the Doges, of the Rialto and 'silent highways.' I walk the Piazza of St. Marc with Shylock and Othello and Jessica, but in thought I roam with you the leafy paths of Hermit's Dell. This is a strange city! the swiftly gliding, funereal gondolas, the deserted and desecrated palaces, the degenerated people, all impress me wonderfully; yet it is as a dream, and I cannot realize that I am in Venice. You, Harry, may never cease to regret not coming here when you were in Italy. Florence, Rome, Naples, each have their charms and storied associations, but Venice is unique. I wish you could see the Ducal palace, whose long halls are fairly warmed by the glowing colors of Titian, Paul Veronese and Tintoretto. I wish you could stand with me in the Barbarigo palace, before the

wonderful 'Magdalen' or over the tomb of its author, on which is inscribed—

'Qui giace il gran Tiziano.'

But I must wait till I am with you all again before I can relate my impressions; a letter is but a poor vehicle to convey them. * * * * *
* * * * * Tell Blanche she must not be married before I return, which will be in three months, unless I go to the East, which depends upon my companion. * * * * *

Have you made the acquaintance of the strange being you wrote me about in your last letter? By the by, it came to hand at Paris. If you write again, direct as before, for I do not think I shall reach Egypt. A few words about * * * * *
* * * * *

But the rest is for myself, and I expect Frank will not dream that I have transcribed his rambling letter into my diary; but it gladdened an evening in our experience, and so it must have its page. Blanche was a little disappointed at not having a few lines especially for herself, but this was soon forgotten. Frank's letter had really given me the Italian fever, so I spent the rest of the evening over my own journal, written five years before, and in brushing up my memories of masters and master-pieces sadly confused

What an influence a friend's letter exerts upon the spirit! If kind and genial, it seems almost like the familiar pressure of the hand that wrote it; if harsh or reproving, it wounds us; if ungracious and condemning, it angers us, and threatens to sever the links which never so much weight of mutual grief or care could weaken or separate!

Frank's letter had imbued us all with its warm Italian spirit; it even generated yearnings to be with him in his travels, and made us almost discontented with our hitherto charming locality. But a thought was engendered in my brain, as a passing breeze bore to our ears the voice of the waterfall far down in the valley. It whispered the magic name, *La Solitaire*. Yes, it dissipated my dreams of Venetian gondolas and palaces, Shylock and Titian. I looked at Blanche; she was bending over her tambour frame, and I saw that her thoughts were far away; perhaps in the sunny south,—perhaps nearer home. Minnie is busy too upon a new frock for Birdie, and with maternal vanity is doubtless thinking how becoming it will be to his fair skin and rotund form.

Preparatory to the suggestion I was about to make, I stepped out upon the piazza, (*Anglice*, porch, for my evening researches had reminded me of the misnomer,) to take an observation of the weather. It was a beautiful night, but a rime, glistening like diamond

dust in the light of the moon, lay upon the grass and coated the lightest branches of the shrubbery. On the river, white sails were gleaming as if unsoiled by time or weather, whilst the lantern of the *Pharos*, ever lighted by its watchful guardian to warn unskilful mariners of the shoal it stands upon, seemed a superfluous feature of the scene; though its cheerful radiance has been often our pleasure during the dreary nights of stormy March. The cool night air effectually dissipated my Italian fever, so I came back to my chair and cold supper, for we dine early in the country, with a wholesome appetite.

The good bread and butter and cold beef had the effect of opening our long silent mouths in a twofold sense. Blanche had done dreaming, for a while at least, and Birdie's gay frock was finished excepting the buttons, so I had the field to myself, for I knew it would require some degree of persuasion on my part to secure Minnie's co-operation at least, into my plan, for they both had always felt a little afraid of *La Solitaire*. As Blanche is the most persuasible of the two, I try her first. "Blanche," I said, "let me show you how to catch a trout to-morrow; you may have my light rod, I will bait the hook for you and take the fish off, if you get one; you shall do none of the drudgery of the sport. You need not be afraid of the sun either, for my seat is a shady one, and the

April sun is not warm enough to be unpleasant." "No, cousin," replies Blanche, "I want to finish this piece in time for the fair at the church next week; besides, I have two or three letters to write, and I have promised to make Uncle William a visit certainly this month, so you see I have my hands full; but I will go one of these days." "But Blanche, cousin mine, it will only be for an hour or two, you can certainly spare that time, and now it is not so warm as it will be in June."

"But, cousin Harry, I had rather not go; why are you so pertinacious, I fancy you have some other object in mind, haven't you now, speak the truth?" "Well Blanche," said I, not wishing to commit myself, "I will not urge you, we will wait your pleasure, for the fish need coaxing; they won't bite at unwilling hooks, you know."

Minnie is equally intractable; she does not like fishing, and not only that, there are household matters requiring attention. The cook has given notice of retiring from kitchen duties to become a wife, and there will be a week or two before another can be persuaded to "lave her frinds" in the city and go to the "lone counthry." So I am completely vanquished, and decide to await another letter from Frank, which may cause a relapse of the "fever," for this I think will beget a sympathy for La Solitaire. I sit down again to my book, the "Cosmos" of Humboldt, which Frank's

letter and my old journal has superseded for a while, and am soon absorbed in his "study of nature," with all its wonderful and philosophical details. To the ardent lover of nature and all that is her handiwork, he who derives his highest pleasure in the contemplation of grasses, mosses and springing flowers, in beholding the glories of sunrise and sunset, and the silvery radiance of moonlight; to him who listens with "rapt ear" to the whispers of leaf-stirring breezes or the roar of the tempest amid the primeval forests; to him who loves the murmur of streams, the voice of the waterfall and the dash of ocean's surge; or finds delight in anything that is Nature's, how fertile seems the theme which the great naturalist expounds!

He awakens memories of our schoolboy days, and going back to our *alma mater*, we con again the well-worn Pliny, Virgil, and Euripides of those classic days. Then there are Gregory of Nyssa and Chrysostom the hermit, Camoens and Dante, and a host of others, ancient and modern, with whose works we are more or less familiar.

But Blanche is dozing, Minnie is getting impatient, my lamp is burning dim, and it is long past bedtime.