

XVII.

THE summer is waning, and Nature has lost much of that freshness which so enhances her beauty. The sheen of ripeness is over woods and fields and gardens, awakening thoughts of Ceres and Pomona, and the yellow-haired Bacchus.

It is a season of both labor and joy to the farmer, for his toil is rewarded with rich promise and opulent yield.

This is perhaps the last harvest season that my good neighbor Mead may ever know, unless it be in that unknown clime, "where he shall come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."

He sent over for me yesterday, to come and sit with him awhile; for he has been complaining, during the past week, of symptoms which seem to indicate a mortal disease.

He has been a hard-worker all his lifetime, and it is telling on his frame now, though to a casual observer it would not be apparent.

Sitting on the porch in his large arm-chair, he looks with me over the fields which he has tilled so long and well, and heaves a sigh.

"He hears the Autumn rustling in his corn,
Cloud chases cloud across his bending grain;
The reaper's scythe-song greets the golden morn,
The soft eve welcomes home the loaded wain."

But he cannot go as he used to, and reap or bind with as stalwart and tireless arm as the youngest.

He is beginning to despond, but I endeavor to cheer him with the hope that his day is not ended yet.

He cannot think so, and begins to talk more familiarly with me than ever before. "I see it all ahead," he says; "yes, I know well when I am gone that the old farm will run down and go into other hands before long. The old woman will soon follow me, and Abel is young and foolish, always wants guiding—running after new notions all the time, and yet I've done my best with the boy—but it's his nature—yes, I see it all."

In some such strain the old man talks since he has been complaining; he cannot bear the idea of the farm passing into the hands of others, and his prescience may prove true. It is very doubtful if his son follows in his footsteps.

Frank is married at last! His letter conveying the news arrived to day, and we are all to meet him and his bride to-morrow at their beautiful home. Blanche is very happy of course, and fairly nervous with impa-

tience to welcome her new sister, whom she has never seen.

"I wonder what her style of beauty is," she says; "Frank never would tell me any particulars; he said I must wait and see; Frank is so funny sometimes."

"No matter now, Blanche, you will see for yourself in twelve hours or so. Come! it is too cool to sit on the porch any longer; the dew is very heavy to-night; let us have one of those 'fantasies' Frank brought you; the piano has not been opened for a month. I want to write a little to-night, and you know that music is suggestive."

My fair cousin is always obliging, so I have music to my heart's content for the rest of the evening, beginning with "Les Fugitives," and ending with "Don Pasquale." Blanche sings delightfully too, but has never forgiven me for what she pleases to call "a piece of my flattery," in my writing on a page of her scrap book, "Inscribed to Blanche,"

"So sweet in her is music's power,
Her mouth breaths fragrance like a flower,
And the bee passing, as he sips,
Makes honey from her odorous lips."

Minnie, always busy, is embroidering some fanciful article of apparel for Blanche's wardrobe or *trousseau*,

which, from the quantity of work and material I have seen for the last six weeks, ought to last her half a lifetime. But it is nearly finished now, for in two weeks, the eventful day will arrive

But here comes Bridget with a dish of luscious grapes, such rich Catawbas as Bacchus never knew. "Put away your work for to-night, Minnie; and Blanche, you think you are consumptive sometimes, eat your fill! Are they not delicious? and these Heath peaches! why, Minnie, you should keep these to brandy, they are far better than those 'Morris whites' you bought at the nursery the other day."

We sit long over our evening feast, and make plans for the next week and week after.

To-morrow we go to Briar-cliff. On Monday, Frank and his wife must dine with us; and during the week we will visit back and forth.

The week after, there will be this and that to do in preparation for Blanche's wedding, which is to be very quiet. After Madame R—— returns from the Falls—Niagara of course—she is to make a visit at Glen-Clunie, then spend a week with us and receive her country friends.

"Then, Blanche," says Minnie, and the tears come into her eyes, "you will go to your new home; and when shall we see you again? I cannot bear to think of it!"

This makes Blanche feel pathetic, and we have quite a "scene" for awhile; till a little philosophising on my part brings smiles again. After all, how dependent we are upon each other!

XVIII.

ANOTHER month has gone! and how much that was dear and beautiful to us has gone with it from our view! some, for a season—the rest, for ever!

The birds of summer are flocking to take their accustomed exodus towards the sunny South; the flowers are fading, leaves beginning to wither and fall. The woods are gorgeous with those countless tints which no painter's pencil may copy, and which nowhere else in the world are half so beautiful as here.

Blanche has gone too, and more than birds or flowers, we miss her. Our old neighbor Mead, worn and wasted at last, is receiving his reward. Whilst we were gay and happy, whilst sounds of mirth were in our dwelling, sadness and sighs were in his; yet we miss him and sorrow with those who mourn a good man, a kind father, and a warm friend gone.

At Briar-cliff we have been frequent and welcome visitors. Frank and his wife are as happy as our warmest wishes could have them.

I cannot picture, on the pages of my diary, the face and form which are my friend's delight, or echo in

other ears the voice that is his music. Enough it is to say, that she is all his heart could crave—all that can bless his life.

We have all been in such a state of excitement during the last month, entertaining, and being entertained, "marrying and giving in marriage," it is difficult to settle down again to our usually quiet life. Blanche is coming back to stay with us awhile, before going to the South; though she has promised to spend her summers with us. She is happy, except in leaving us, and Hermit's Dell, so rich in dear and pleasant associations.

Frank is making a paradise, almost, around him; it would be difficult to find a lovelier spot.

He has acted upon my suggestion made some time ago, and is building a tower upon the verge of the cliff, which will command a beautiful view, not only of his grounds, but the surrounding country, and the river gleaming in the distance.

The ravine below is a peaceful resort, and capable of being beautified also. Yet Nature has done her part, and at this season—

"There,

The children of the autumnal whirlwind bear
In wanton sport, those bright leaves, whose decay,
Red, yellow, or ethereally pale,

Rival the pride of summer. 'Tis the haunt
Of every gentle wind, whose breath can teach
The wilds to love tranquillity."

Frank and I spent a day in and about Hermit's Dell last week, shooting quails, with which the thickets abound this season. We were very successful, and on our way home, stopped to chat with La Solitaire, as we still call her, and leave her a few of the birds. She still talks of going back to Italy; her heart is evidently there. Frank asked her if she would not leave Pietro with him, and he would educate him; but she prefers that her boy shall go with her, if she returns, and follow his father's occupation, for which he has a decided talent. He is highly delighted with the box of colors which Frank gave him, and is commencing to use them.

Frank says that he has no doubt I most heartily wish for La Solitaire's departure, hoping I may get the picture she has promised me conditionally; but I do not plead guilty to being as selfish as he insinuates: though I must acknowledge I look at the painting with a covetous eye whenever I visit the owner.

Poor, lonely woman! she may be happy in her self-chosen and peculiar solitude, but I do not believe she is; and we decide that the next time Minnie goes to see her, she shall inquire more fully into her wants and wishes.

Winter will soon be here, and how much better for her to be amidst the orange groves and vineyards of her native valley, than in this lonely glen. I am sure her heart would leap with joy were the prospect before her; but she has too much delicacy to ask assistance: or it may be—pride.

There are many little improvements and alterations I contemplate making this season about our grounds, provided that Frank and his wife do not prevail on us to build on that fair site he has at Briar-cliff. There is no telling how it may be; it all rests with Minnie, and she is cogitating on the subject. One advantage at any rate, would be in having a good school near at hand for our little Birdie, one of these days; and there are other matters too to be considered, which make it desirable.

Minnie and I were caught in a storm there a few nights since, and obliged to stay till morning. How comfortable it was in the library, with its glowing pictures and high-piled book-cases! What a scene of quiet and domestic comfort! Frank at his desk, writing something "funny," as Blanche says, for the "Spirit of the Times," *currente calamo*: Minnie and the lady of the house, buried amidst the cushions of a luxurious sofa, engaged in confidential chit-chat; and my humble self, stretched out in the reading chair,

absorbed in "Michelet," excepting the few moments in which I survey our *tableau vivant*.

By and by, when the wind whistles louder, and the rain beats faster against the windows, we get up a concert of our own; Frank with his flute, his wife on her guitar, and Minnie at the piano—together with their voices—discourse

"Soft Lydian airs
Married to immortal verse."

But one rich voice is wanting to make the harmony complete, and that is Blanche's; but next week she will be here, and there will be a grand reunion."

The storm is over, and what a change it has wrought in the appearance of our country! The trees are almost leafless, and a phase of cheerlessness is cast over the face of Nature, before so smiling.

In another month, it will be winter, dreary and cold in our northern latitude, and we shall be more than ever dependent upon each other for comfort and enjoyment.

Another season, and much of our interest in Hermit's Dell and its surrounding haunts may have ceased. Change is over all!

"But the unborn hour,
Cradled in fear and hope, conflicting storms,
Who shall unveil? Nor thou, nor I, nor any
Mighty or wise."

XIX.

THE winds of winter, laden with snow and sleet are sweeping over the hills and through the glens between them, piling up great drifts along our hedge-rows and shrubbery, and shrouding the young evergreens which were looking so verdant and cheerful.

One only, a graceful hemlock, remains uncovered. It stands in a sunny corner, where the north wind cannot reach it, and was planted by our cousin Blanche on the day of her departure.

"Something lively," she said, "to remind you of me in the dreary winter, dear Minnie."

Yes, Blanche, we will often look on your little *immortelle*, and think of you in your sweet southern home around which no snows gather: but as yet our memories need no prompter.

It has been a long storm, and we have been penned in-doors to profit and amuse ourselves as we best could. The snow lies over a foot deep, and Teddy and I, with the aid of "old Charley," have been striving to break the road through the dense drifts which cover our approach from the road houseward. It is very cold and

severe work for us all, but it is over at last, and that necessary purveyor, the butcher, is the first one to reap the advantage of our labor. He brings the mail of four days with him too—a most acceptable packet, and which will be the means of making one evening at least pass speedily enough.

I go to the house and shuffling off my moccasins on the porch, doff my rough frieze overcoat, and donning my wrapper, compose myself in the great chair before the fire for uninterrupted enjoyment of my news-budget.

Opening the wrapper I find a letter from Blanche to Minnie, who is sitting near me engaged in knitting a pair of Polish boots with which to encase her feet when sleighing, of which from present prospects we shall enjoy a superabundance.

The work is thrown aside and she is soon absorbed in the perusal of Blanche's, epistle, an eight-paged one, closely written.

I look up from my paper occasionally upon her face, over which expressions flit changeful as the gleams and shadows of an April day over a fair landscape. If I read them aright, Blanche must be as happy a bride "as the sun shines upon," her lot bright as the skies which bend over her. By and by Minnie reads to me a sentence here and there. May I not transcribe one?

"Yes, Minnie, I am very, very happy, my spirit is in sunshine all the time, but I often find myself asking—Will I always be thus happy? Are there no clouds in view?"

"What a blessed thing it is that we cannot look into the Future! Sometimes I feel a little lonesome, and then I think of you all and wish I were nearer to you: but how can I be dissatisfied with my lot!"

"I am looking forward already to the summer, when I hope to make you that promised visit. I suppose you are enjoying sleigh-riding now to the utmost, but I wish you were here to enjoy the bananas you are so fond of."

It is a joy to us that Blanche is thus happy, for upon a nature like hers anything like disappointment falls with a saddening influence. The letter is laid away to be re-read and answered, and I return to my papers.

As the afternoon wears away, the sky clears up and the wind begins to rise again, making the air bitter cold. Our cottage stands exposed to the full force of the northern wind, and, being intended only as a summer residence, we have great difficulty to keep ourselves comfortable.

There is a rap upon the outer door: who can it be braving the snow and wind? I go to the door and find that it is Pietro, the child of La Solitaire.

He is warmly clad, but he has been up to his waist amidst the snow-drifts and shivers like a leaf. I take a broom to him and beat off the clinging snow, then bring him to the fire. He has a book in his hand, one I lent his mother some time since, but his sole errand is not to return that.

Well, Pietro what is it? His lip commences to quiver as he tells us that his mother is sick and wants to see us. She is in need of tea and sugar too, and doubtless of other necessaries, for she has not been able to go to the store very lately.

It is cold and disagreeable enough, but it is our duty to go. Teddy is ordered to bring up the light sleigh, for we cannot walk there, and whilst he is getting ready, we fortify ourselves as well as possible against the searching wind and drifting snow.

Teddy comes with the sleigh well stocked with robes, and Minnie has had the wisdom of providing a bottle of hot water to keep her feet warm. She has packed a basket too with little delicacies and necessaries for Bella, which she knows will be acceptable and thankfully received.

We place Pietro between our feet and Teddy arranges the warm furs so that not a crevice is left for rude Boreas to pry into.

Though our destination is but a few moments' walk from the cottage by the foot-path, we are obliged to

drive a circuit of some four miles to reach it. We find the road unbroken after leaving our gate, and Charley has about as much as he can do to flounder through the drifts and draw us after him.

The road keeps the river bank for a mile or two and then enters the woods. How beautiful are the cedars and hemlocks, clothed as in winding sheets! Now and then a limb bursts through its shroud, emerging, as it were, into life again, and seeming to say—

“Oh year! we are immortal, we die not with thee.”

It is almost evening when we reach the narrow defile forming the entrance into the glen, and in a few minutes' time we are at the cabin door. A taper casts its feeble glimmer through the window: no human form is visible; the scene is one of utter loneliness.

Pietro emerges from his warm muffings, and fearlessly jumping into the snow, opens the door. I lift Minnie out, and placing her on the threshold, hand her the basket of provisions, and then make our faithful co-worker, Charley, as comfortable as possible.

As I am about to enter the cabin, Minnie tells me there is no wood within, and the fire is expiring, that I must hunt up some fuel.

I find a heap of dead branches against the southern house-side, and with the aid of Pietro a goodly quantity

is brought and soon cracking and blazing upon the hearth.

Poor Bella! she is very sick, and can scarce express her thanks for our coming to her. She has a racking cough, and already looks wasted with fever, the effects of too much exposure to the inclement weather.

“Ah, Bella! you were born and nurtured under a warmer sky than ours! Would that you were now where your thoughts are oftentimes—amidst the orange groves of sweet La-Cava.”

“Yes, señor, it is my heart's wish—but how can I return!”

As the night gathers, Minnie proposes that she remain with the sick woman, for there is no one to wait on her, and that I return home to bring some other necessaries in the morning. The doctor must be sent for too, but that cannot be done to-night. Minnie's plan seems the wisest under the circumstances, and after making everything snug I start homeward alone. It is bitterly cold, and I rejoice to reach my own fireside again, for I am perfectly impregnated with the frosty air; but the fragrant tea is steaming on the hearth, and I am in a mood to enjoy it.

Birdie misses his mother, and most pertinaciously asks me again and again when she will come back. Her absence is a novelty to him, and the reason I give for it is incomprehensible to him.

How blissful is childhood's unconsciousness of the pains and sorrows of humanity! Its sky is ever bright, its flowers ever blooming, and as we look upon the smoothly rounded cheek, the lithe and dancing form—as we hear the joyous prattle and unstudied laugh of childhood, how few of us often sigh not—

“Oh! what a world of beauty fades away,
With the winged hours of youth.”

But Birdie's prattle is soon hushed in slumber, and I am alone. The wind sweeps and whistles drearily round the cottage, begetting a feeling almost of melancholy.

I take up a paper, and turning to its “fun corner” strive to laugh over its oddities, but it is futile for me to make the endeavor. My thoughts are in the gloomy depths of Hermit's Dell—the sick chamber wherein Minnie is administering to the invalid Bella.

She will not sleep to-night I know; what a cheerless vigil she will keep in that lonely dwelling! Oh, woman! frail and gentle as thou seemest, thy spirit is brave and strong!

I have a letter in my desk which I prize very much. It was written by a friend years ago, and I read it very often still. His heart was almost broken when he traced these lines:

“Yes, my young wife is dead: she was very dear to

me you know. It was very hard for me to give her up, and I cannot realize that she is gone. The piano is still open as she left it the day she sickened. There is her sewing-chair and work-table, and the little garment in the drawer still unfinished. Her moss-rose and mignonette are blooming under the window, but their fragrance is wasted. Only a year gone since she was a bride; you remember how lovely she looked in her wreath of orange blossoms.

“I was sick once, and she tended me. Many a long hour she sat by my bedside, bathing my pulses when they were wild with fever: and when I was well again, how happy she became, how radiant were her smiles. Here is the garden, and the little arbor overhung by the passion-vine and clematis, where we used to sit and talk of ‘days gone.’ Oh! my friend! I am very lonely—may your heart and home never be thus desolate.”

Poor Fred! years have gone since he met his great loss, but he often talks and writes of his “angel wife,” and has never married again. With all its wretchedness, his heart could not wail with Edgar Poe—

“Respite, respite, and nepenthe,
From the memories of Lenore,
Quaff! O quaff this kind nepenthe,
And forget thy lost Lenore.”