

**GIBSON
WILLIAM
HAMILTON**

PASTORAL DAYS; OR,
MEMORIES OF A NEW
ENGLAND YEAR

William Gibson
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of a New England Year

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W. Hamilton Gibson
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of a New England Year

SPRING







AS far as the eye can reach, the snow lies in a deep mantle over the cheerless landscape. I look out upon a dreary moor, where the horizon melts into the cold gray of a heavy sky. The restless wind sweeps with pitiless blast through shivering trees and over bleak hills, from whose crests, like a great white veil, the clouds of hoary flakes are lifted and drawn along by the gale. Down the upland slope, across the undulating field, the blinding drift, like a thing of life, speeds in its wild caprice, now swirling in fantastic eddies around some isolated stack, half hidden in its chill embrace, now winding away over bare-blown wall and scraggy fence, and through the sighing willows near the frozen

stream; now with a wild whirl it flies aloft, and the dark pines and hemlocks on the mountain-side fade away in its icy mist. Again, yonder it appears trailing along the meadow, until, flying like some fugitive spirit chased from earth by the howling wind, it vanishes in the sky. On every side these winged phantoms lead their flying chase across the dreary landscape, and fence and barn and house upon the hill in turn are dimmed or lost to sight.

Who has not watched the strange antics of the drifting snow whirling past the window on a blustering winter's day? But this is not a winter's day. This is the advent of a New England spring.



CATKINS.



PUSSIES.

Such days in March are too perfect to endure, and at night the sky is overcast and dark. Then follows a long warm rain that unlocks the ice in all the streams. The whiteness of the hills and meadows melts into broad contracting strips and patches. One by one, as mere specks upon the landscape, these vanish in turn, until the last vestige of winter is washed from the face of the earth to swell the tide of the rushing stream. Even now, from the distant valley, we hear a continuous muffled roar, as the mighty freshet, impelled by an irresistible force, ploughs its tortuous channel through the lowlands and ravines. The quiet town is filled with

an unusual commotion. Excited groups of towns-people crowd the village store, and eager voices tell of the havoc wrought by the fearful flood. We hear how the old toll-bridge, with tollman's house and all, was lifted from its piers like a pile of straw, and whirled away upon the current. How its floating timbers, in a great blockade, crushed into the old mill-pond; how the dam had burst, and the rickety red saw-mill gone to pieces down the stream. Farmer Nathan's barn had gone, and his flat meadows were like a whirling sea, strewn with floating rails and driftwood. Every hour records its new disaster as some eager messenger returns from the excited crowds which line the river-bank. How well I remember the fascinating excitement of the spring freshet as I watched the rising water in the big swamp lot, anxious lest it might creep up and undermine the wall foundations of the barn! And what a royal raft I made from the drifting logs and beams, and with the spirit of an adventurous explorer sailed out on the deep gliding current, floating high among the branches of the half submerged willow-trees, and scraping over the tips of the tallest alder-bushes, whose highest twigs now hardly reached the surface! How deep and dark the water looked as I lay upon the raft and peered into the depths below! But this jolly fun was of but short duration. The flood soon subsided, and on the following morning nothing was seen excepting the settlements of *débris* strewn helter-skelter over the meadow, and hanging on all the bushes.

The tepid rain has penetrated deep into the yielding ground, and with the winter's frost now coming to the surface, the roads

are well-nigh impassable with their plethora of mud. For a full appreciation of *mud* in all its glory, and in its superlative degree, one should see a New England highway “when the frost comes out of the ground.” The roads are furrowed with deep grimy ruts, in which the bedabbled wheels sink to their hubs as in a quicksand, and the hoofs of the floundering horse are held in the swampy depths as if in a vise. For a week or more this state of things continues, until at length, after warm winds and sunny days, the ground once more packs firm beneath the tread. This marks the close of idle days. The junk pile in the barn is invaded, and the rusty plough abstracted from the midst of rakes and scythes and other farming tools. The old white horse thrusts his long head from the stall near by, and whinnies at the memories it revives, and with pricked-up ears and whisking tail tells plainly of the eagerness he feels.



EARLY PLOUGHING.



RETURN FROM THE FIELDS.



VOICES OF THE NIGHT.

So runs the record of a busy day in the early New England springtime, and with its all-absorbing industry it is a day that passes quickly. The afternoon runs into evening. Cool shadows creep across the landscape as the glowing sun sinks through the

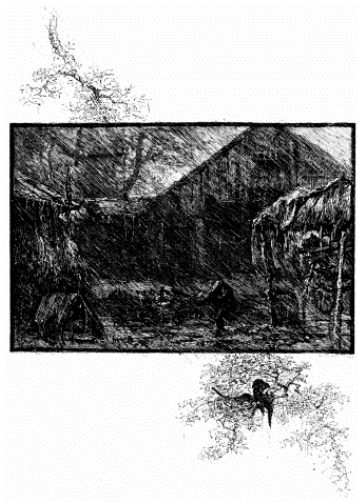
still bare and leafless trees and disappears behind the wooded hills. The fields are now deserted, and through the uncertain twilight we see the little knots of workmen with their swinging pails, and hear their tramp along the homeward road. In the dim shadows of the evergreens beyond, a faint gray object steals into view. Now it stops at the old watering-trough, and I hear the sip of the eager horse and the splash of overflowing water. Some belated ploughman, fresh, perhaps, from a half-hour's gossip at the village store. I hear the sound of hoofs upon the stones as they renew their way, the dragging of the chain upon the gravelly bed, and the receding form is lost in the darkening road. One by one the scattered barns and houses have disappeared in the gathering dusk, marked only by the faint columns of blue smoke that rise above the trees, and melt away against the twilight sky. I look out upon a wilderness of gloom, where all above is still and clear, and all below is wrapped in impenetrable mystery. A plaintive piping trill now breaks the impressive stillness. Again and again I hear the little lonely voice vibrating through the low-lying mist. It is only a little frog in some far-off marsh; but what a sweet sense of sadness is awakened by that lowly melody! How its weird minor key, with its magic touch, unlocks the treasures of the heart. Only the peeping of a frog; but where in all the varied voices of the night, where, even among the great chorus of nature's sweetest music, is there another song so lulling in its dreamy melody, so full of that emotive charm which quickens the human heart? How often in the vague spring twilight have I yielded to the strange,

fascinating melancholy awakened by the frog's low murmur at the water's edge! How many times have I lingered near some swampy roadside bog, and let these little wizards weave their mystic spell about my willing senses, while the very air seemed to quiver in the fulness of their song! I remember the tangle of tall and withered rushes, through whose mysterious depths the eye in vain would strive to penetrate at the sound of some faint splash or ripple, or perhaps at the quaint, high-keyed note of some little isolated hermit, piping in his sombre solitude. I recall the first glimpse of the rising moon, as its great golden face peered out at me from over the distant hill, enclosing half the summit against its broad and luminous surface. Slowly and steadily it seemed to steal into view, until, risen in all its fulness, I caught its image in the trembling ripples at the edge of the soggy pool, where the palpitating water responded to the frog's low, tremulous monotone. Higher and higher it sails across the inky sky, its glow now changed to a silvery pallor, across whose white halo, in a floating film, the ghostly clouds glide in their silent flight. A dull tinkling of some distant cow-bell breaks the spell, and recalls my wandering thoughts, and as I again take up my way along the moonlit road, the glimmering windows on right and left betray the hiding-places of a score of humble homes. Not far beyond I see the swinging motion of a flickering lantern, as some tardy farmer's boy, whistling about his work, clears up his nightly chores. Now he enters the old barn-door. I see the light glinting through the open cracks, and hear the lowing of the

cows, the bleating of the baby-calf, and rattling chains of oxen in the stanchion rows. Now again I catch the gleam at the open door; the swinging light flits across the yard, and the old corn-crib starts from its obscurity. I see the boyish figure relieved against the glow within as a basketful of yellow ears are gathered for the impatient mouths in the noisy manger stalls. Sing on, my boy, enjoy it while you may! That venerable barn will yield a fragrance to you in after-life that will conjure up in your heart a throng of memories as countless as the shining grains that glimmer in the light you hold, and as golden, too, as they. I wonder if those soft-winged bats squeak among the clapboards, or make their fluttering zigzag swoops about your lantern as they were wont to do in olden times.

Then there was that big-eyed owl, too, that perched upon the maple-tree outside my window, and cried as if its heart would break at the doleful tidings it foretold. What a world of kind solicitude that dolorous bird awakened in our superstitious neighbor across the road! How she overwhelmed us with her sympathy, aroused by that sepulchral omen! But I still live, and so does the owl, for aught I know; and I sometimes think that this aged, stooping dame over the way has never fully recovered from her disappointment, for she always greets me with a sigh and an injured expression, as she says, in her high and tremulous voice, "Well! well! back agin ez hale 'n hearty 's ever; an' arter the way thet ar witch bird yewst teu call ye, too, night arter night. Jest teu *think* on't! an' we'd all a' gi'n ye up fer sartin. Well! well!

I never see the beat on't. Yen deu seem teu hang on *paowerful*;" and, after a moment's hesitation, seemingly in which to swallow the bitter pill, she usually adds, with sad solicitude, "Feelin' perty *tol'ble teu*, I spose?" But the "witch bird" never roused my serious apprehensions. I remember its plaintive cry only as a tender bit of pathos in the pages of my early history.



A RAINY DAY.

I recall, too, the pleasant sound upon the shingles overhead as the dark-clouded sky let fall its tell-tale drops to warn us of the coming rain. How many times have I glided into dream-land under the drowsy influence of the patter on the roof, and

the ever varying tattoo upon the tin beneath the dripping eaves! Who can forget those rainy days, with their games of hide-and-seek in the old dark garret! How we looked out upon the muddy puddled road, and laughed at the great drifting sheets of water that ever and anon poured down from some bursting cloud, and roared upon the roof! And as the driving rain beat against the blurred window-panes, what strange capers the squirming tree-trunks outside seemed to play for our amusement: the dark doorway of the barn, too – now swelling out to twice its size, now stretching long and thin, or dividing in the middle in its queer contortions. Out in the dismal barn-yard we saw the forlorn row of hens huddled together on the hay-rick, under the drizzling straw-thatched shed; and the gabled coop near by, in whose dry retreat the motherly old hen spread her tawny wings, and yielded the warmth of her ruffled breast to the tender needs of her little family, peeping so contentedly beneath her. The rain-proof ducks dabble in the neighboring puddles, and chew the muddy water in search of floating dainties, or gulp with nodding heads the unlucky angle-worms which come struggling to the surface – drowned out of their subterranean tunnels.

Now we hear the snapping of the latch at the foot of the garret stairs, and we are called to come and see a little outcast that John has brought in from the wood-pile. Close beside the kitchen-stove a doubled piece of blanket lies upon the floor, and within its folds we find what once was a downy little chicken, now drenched and dying from exposure. He was a naughty, wayward child, and

would persist in thinking that he knew more than his mother. At least so I was told – indeed, it was impressed upon me. But the little fellow was rescued just in time. The warmth will soon revive him, and by-and-by we shall hear his little chirp and see him trot around the kitchen-floor, pecking at that everlasting fly, perhaps, or at some tiny red-hot coal that snaps out from the stove.

Little did we suspect the mission of those rainy days, so drear and dismal without, or the sweet surprise preparing for us in the myriad mysteries of life beneath the sod, where every root and thread-like rootlet in the thirsty earth was drinking in that welcome moisture, and numberless sleeping germs, dwelling in darkness, were awakening into life to seek the light of day, waiting only for the glory of a sunny dawn to burst forth from their hiding-places! That sunny morn does come at last, and in its beams it sheds abroad a power that stirs the deepest root. It is, indeed, a glorious day. The clustered buds upon the silver-maples burst in their exuberance, and fringe the graceful branches with their silken tassels. The restless crocus, for months an unwilling captive in its winter prison, can contain itself no longer, and with its little overflowing cup lifts up its face to the blue heaven. Golden daffodils burst into bloom on drooping stems, and exchange their little nods on right and left. The air is filled with a faint perfume, in which the very earth mould yields its fragrance – that wild aroma only known to spring. Our little feathered friends, so few and far between as yet, are full of song. The bluebird woos his mate with a loving warble, full

of tender sweetness, as they flit among the swaying twigs, or pry with diligent search for some snug nesting-place among the hollow crannies of the orchard trees. The noisy blackbirds hold high carnival in the top of the old pine-tree, the woodpecker taps upon the hollow limb his resonant tattoo, and the hungry crows, like a posse of tramps, hang around the great oak-tree upon the knoll, and watch to see what they can steal. Down through the meadow the gurgling stream babbles as of old, and along its fretted banks the alder thickets are hanging full with drooping catkins swinging at every breeze. The glossy willow-buds throw off their coat of fur, and plume themselves in their wealth of inflorescence, lighting up the brook-side with a yellow glow, and exhaling a fresh, delicious perfume. Here, too, we hear the rattling screech of the swooping kingfisher, as with quick beats of wing he skims along the surface of the stream, and with an ascending glide settles upon the overhanging branch above the ripples. All these and a thousand more I vividly recall from the memory of that New England spring; but sweetest of all its manifold surprises was that crowning consummation, that miracle of a single night, bringing on countless wings through the early morning mist the welcome chorus of the returning flocks of birds. How they swarmed the orchard and the elms, where but yesterday the bluebird held his sway! Now we see the fiery oriole in his gold and jetty velvet flashing in the morning sun, and robins without number swell their ruddy throats in a continuous roundelay of song. The pert cat-bird in his Quaker garb is here,

and with flippant jerk of tail and impertinent mew bustles about among the arbor-vitæ, where even now are remnants of his last year's nest. The puffy wrens, too, what saucy, sputtering little bursts of glee are theirs as they strut upon the rustic boxes in the maples! The fields are vocal with their sweet spring medley, in which the happy carols of the linnets and the song sparrows form a continuous pastoral. Now we hear the mellow bell of the wood thrush echoing from some neighboring tree, and all intermingled with the chatter and the gossip of the martens on their lofty house. Birds in the sky, birds in the trees and on the ground, birds everywhere, and not a silent throat among them; but from far and near, from mountain-side and meadow, from earth and sky, uniting in a happy choral of perpetual jubilee.



A HANDFUL FROM THE WOODS.

Down in the moist green swamp lot the yellow cowslips bloom along the shallow ditch, and the eager farmer's wife fills her basket with the succulent leaves she has been watching for so long; for they'll tell you in New England that "they ain't noth'n' like caowslips for a mess o' greens." Near by we see the frog pond, with lush growth of arrow leaves and pickerel weed, and flat blades of blue-flag just starting from the boggy earth. Half submerged upon a lily pad, close by the water's edge, an ugly toad sits watching for some winged morsel for that ample mouth of his.

Who could believe that so much poetic inspiration could emerge from such a mouth as that; for verily it is this miserable-looking toad that lifts his little voice in the dreamy, drowsy chorus of the twilight. All sorts of odium have been heaped upon the innocent toad; but he only returns good for evil. He is the farmer's faithful friend. He guards his garden by day, and lulls him to sleep by night. Yonder, near those withered cat-tails, we see the village boys among the calamus-beds, pulling up the long white roots tipped with pink and fringed with trickling rootlets. What visions of candied flag-root stimulate them in their zeal! I can almost see the tender, juicy leaf-bud screened beneath that smooth pink sheath, and its aromatic pungency is as fresh and real to me as this appetizing fragrance that comes to us from the green tufts of spearmint we crush beneath our feet at

every step. Bevvies of swallows all around us skim through the air, like feathered darts, in their twittering flight; and the restless starling, like a field-marshal, with his scarlet epaulets, keeps sharp lookout for the enemy, and “flutes his O-ka-lee” from the high alder-bush at the slightest approach upon his chosen ground. Yonder on the wooded slope the feathery shad-tree blooms, like a suspended cloud of drifting snow lingering among the gray twigs and branches; and chasing across the matted leaves beneath, a lively troop of youngsters, girls and boys, make the woods resound with their boisterous jubilee. A jolly band of fugitives fresh from the stormy week’s captivity – spring buds bursting with life, with a pent-up store of spirits that finds escape in an effervescence of ringing laughs and in a din of incessant jabber. Well I know the buoyant exhilaration that impels them on in their reckless frolic, as they skip from stone to stone across the rippling stream, or “stump” each other on the treacherous crossing-pole which spans the deep still current! Now I see them huddle around the trickling grotto among the mossy boulders in the steep gully yonder, where the mountain spring bubbles into a crystal pool. Alas! how quickly its faint blue border of hepaticas is rifled by the ruthless mob! Now they clamber up the great gray rocks beneath the drooping hemlocks, stopping in their headlong zeal to snatch some trembling cluster of anemone, nodding from its velvety bed of moss; now plunging down on hands and knees, shedding innocent blood among an unsuspecting colony of fragile bloom – those glowing blossoms so welcome in the

early spring! Who does not know the bloodroot – that shy recluse hiding away among the mountain nooks, that emblem of chaste purity with its bridal ring of purest gold? Who has not seen its tender leaf-wrapped buds lifting the matted leaves, and spreading their galaxy of snowy stars along the woodland path?

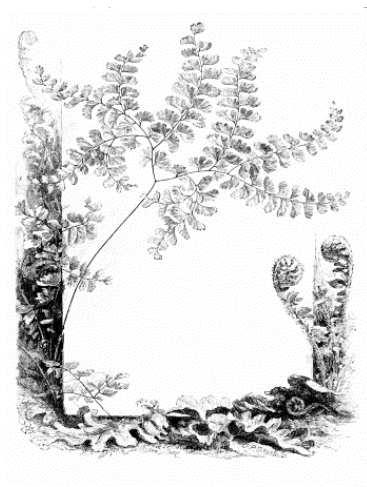
Then there was the shy arbutus, too. Where in all the world's bouquet is there another such a darling of a flower? And where in all New England does that darling show so full and sweet a face as in its home upon that sunny slope I have in mind, and know so well? Was ever such a fragrant tufted carpet spread beneath a hesitating foot? Even now, along the lichen-dappled wall upon the summit, I see the lingering strip of snow, gritty and speckled, and at its very edge, hiding beneath the covering leaves, those modest little faces looking out at me – faces which seemed to blush a deeper pink at their rude discovery. No other flower can breathe the perfume of the arbutus, that earthy, spicy fragrance, which seems as though distilled from the very leaf-mould at its roots. Often on this sunny slope, so sheltered by dense pines and hemlocks, have these charming clusters, pink and white, burst into bloom beneath the snow in March; and even on a certain late February day, we discovered a little, solitary clump, fully spread, and fairly ruddy with the cold. Here, too, we found the earliest sprays of the slender maidenhair; that fairy frond and loveliest among ferns, with black and lustrous stems, and graceful spread of tender gauzy green.



AFTER ARBUTUS.

Where was the nook in all that hill-side woods that we left unsearched in our April ramblings? I recall the “tat,” “tat” upon the dry carpet of beech leaves, as the delicate anemone in my hand is dashed by a falling drop! Lost in eager occupation, we had not observed the shadow that had stolen through the forest; and now, as we look out through the trees, we see the steel-blue warning of the coming shower, and feel the first gust of the tell-tale breeze – how the willows wave and gleam against the deep gray clouds, so weirdly reflected in the gliding stream beneath, like an open seam to another sky! See the silvery flashes of that

flock of pigeons circling against the lurid background. No, we cannot stop to see them, for the rain-drops begin to patter thick and fast. Away we scamper to the shelter of the overhanging rocks. The lowering sky rolls above us through the branches. The glassy surface of the brook takes on a leaden hue as the rain-cloud drags its misty veil across the distant meadows. The brown leaves jump and spatter at my feet, and the blue liverwort flowers on right and left duck their heads like little living things dodging the pelting rain-drops.



THE FAIRY FROND.

Oh, the lovely fickleness an April day! Even now the distant hill is lit up by the bursting sun. Nearer and nearer the gleam

creeps across the landscape, chasing the shower away, and in a moment more the meadows glow with a freshened green, and the trees stand transfigured in glistening beads flashing in the sunbeams. The quickened earth gives forth its grateful incense, and even an enthusiastic frog down in the lily-pond sends up his little vote of thanks.



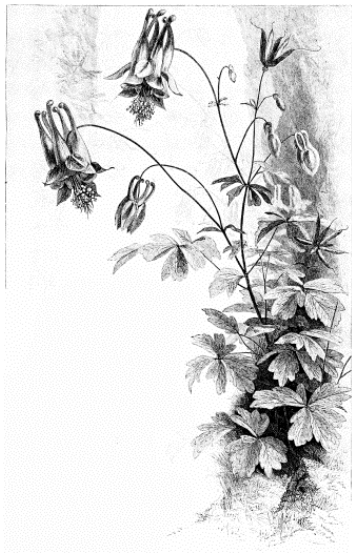
AN APRIL DAY.

April's woods are teeming with all forms of life, if one will only look for them. On every side the ferns, curled up all winter in their dormant sleep, unroll their spiral sprays, and reach out for the welcome sun. The spicy colt's-foot, or wild ginger, lifts its downy leaves among the mossy rocks and crevices, and its homely flower just peeps above the ground, and, with a lingering glance at the blushing *Rue anemone* close by, hangs its humble head, never to look up again. High above us the eccentric cottonwood-tree dangles its long speckled plumes, so silvery white. Now we hear a mellow drumming sound, as some unsuspecting grouse, concealed among the undergrowth near by, beats his resonant breast. Could we but get a glimpse of him,

we would see him simulate the barn-yard gobbler, as with proud strut and spreading tail he disports himself upon some fallen log or mossy rock. Perhaps, too, that coy mate is near, admiring his show of gallantry, and holding a sly flirtation.



AMONG THE WILD FLOWERS.



THE COLUMBINE.

The grotesque Jack-in-the-pulpit, rising above that crumbling log, is named more to my mind. There he stands beneath his striped canopy, and preaches to me a sermon on the well-remembered rashness of my youth in trifling with that subterranean bulb from which he grows. But I ignored his warning in those early days. I only knew that a real nice boy across the way seemed very fond of those little Indian turnips, called them "sugar-roots," and said that they were full of honey. And as he bit off his eager mouthful, and refused to let me taste, I sought one for myself, and, generous boy that he was, he showed

me where to find the buried treasure. It was like a small turnip, an innocent-looking affair (and so was the nice boy's modelled piece of apple, by-the-way). But oh! the sudden revelation of the red-hot reservoir of chain-lightning that crammed that innocent bulb! Even as I think of it, how I long once more to interview that real nice boy who opened up the mysteries of the "sugar-root" to my tempted curiosity. Let boys beware of this wild, red-hot coal; and should they be impelled by a desire to test the unknown flavor, let them solace themselves with a less dangerous mixture of four papers of cambric needles and a spoonful of pounded glass. This will give a faint suggestion of the racy pungency of the Indian turnip. Were some kind friend at the present day to seek to kill me off with poisoned food, I should forthwith have him arrested on a charge of attempted murder, and incarcerated in the county jail. But what would be wilful homicide in the man is only a guileless proof of friendship in the boy, and his affections and their symptoms present a living paradox; and those boisterous days, with all their fond caresses in the way of fights and bruises and black eyes, and even Indian turnips, we all agree were full of fun the like of which we never shall see again.

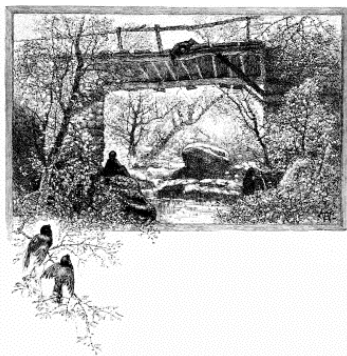


MEADOW BROOK.

How well we remember those tramps along the meadow

brook: the dark, still holes beneath the overhanging rocks, where, with golden slipping loop and pole and cautious creep, we wired those lazy, unsuspecting “suckers” on the gravelly bed below! Ah! what scientific angling with the rod and reel in later years has ever brought back the keen tingle of that primitive sport? The great green bull-frogs, too, in the lily-pond, disclosing their cavernous resources as they jumped and splashed and sprawled after the tantalizing bit of red flannel on that dangling hook! We recall that rickety bridge among the willows, and the mossy nest of mud so firmly fixed upon the beam beneath. How could we be so deaf to the pleading of those little phoebe-birds that fluttered so beseechingly about us? Then there was that deep hole in the sand-bank near the brook, where the burrowing kingfisher hid away his nest, where we watched in the twilight to see him enter, and, with big round stone in readiness, “plugged” him in his den! What fun it was to dig him out, and ventilate his musty nest of fish-bones! The starling in the thicket of the swamp circled through the air with angry “Quit! quit!” as we picked our way through the bristling bogs so close upon her nest. We’ll not forget that false step that sent us sprawling in the green slimy mud, at the first electrifying glimpse of those brown spotted eggs. The high-holer, too, whose golden gleam of wing upon the bare dead tree betrayed his nesting-place in the hollow limb – was ever such a stimulus offered to the eagerness of youth? Who would give a second thought to his tender shins at the prospect of such a prize as a nest of high-hole’s eggs? How round and white they

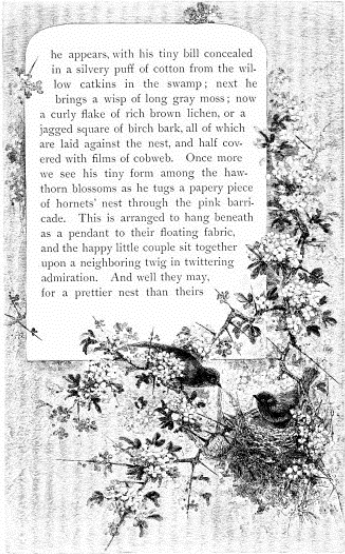
were! how the pale golden yolk floated beneath the pearly shell! Those were jolly days for us; but the poor birds had to suffer, and few, indeed, were the nests that escaped our prying search. There was the cat-bird in the evergreens, with lovely eggs of peacock blue; the pure white treasures of the swallows in the mud nests under the barn-yard eaves; the sky-blue beauties of the robin; the brown speckled eggs in the sheltered nest of song-sparrows on the grassy slope; the dear little eggs of chippies in their horse-hair bed, and in their midst the insinuated specimen of the cheeky cow-blackbird: there were eggs of every shape and hue, and we knew too well where to put our hand on them.



THE PHOEBE'S NEST.

In a flowering hawthorn outside our window we watched a loving pair building their pensile nest among the thorns and blossoms. How incessant was their solicitude for that fragile

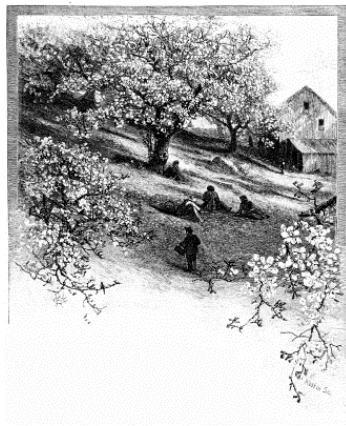
framework until its strength was fully assured against the tossing breeze! Tenderly and eagerly they helped each other in the disposition of those ravellings of string and strips of bark! he stopping every now and then to whisper sweetly to his mate, as she, with drooping, trembling wings, put up her little open bill to kiss. Yes, we often saw this little tender episode, as we watched them through the shutters of the half-closed blinds! Now he flies away; and the little spouse, thus left alone, jumps into the nest, and we see its mossy meshes swell as she fits the deep hollow to her feathery breast. Presently her consort returns, trailing along a gossamer of cobweb, which he throws around the supporting thorn, and leaves for her to spread and tuck among the crevices. Again



he appears, with his tiny bill concealed
in a silvery puff of cotton from the wil-
low catkins in the swamp; next he
brings a wisp of long gray moss; now
a curly flake of rich brown lichen, or a
jagged square of birch bark, all of which
are laid against the nest, and half cov-
ered with films of cobweb. Once more
we see his tiny form among the haw-
thorn blossoms as he tugs a papery piece
of hornets' nest through the pink barri-
cade. This is arranged to hang beneath
as a pendant to their floating fabric,
and the happy little couple sit together
upon a neighboring twig in twittering
admiration. And well they may,
for a prettier nest than theirs

BUILDING THE NEST.

never hung upon a thorn. Not perfect yet, it seems, however,
for that little feminine eye has seen the need of one more touch.
Away she flies, and in a minute more a downy feather, tipped
with iridescent green, is adjusted in the cobwebs.



IN THE APPLE ORCHARD.

This dainty little work of art is only one of the thousands that everywhere are building in the blooming trees and thickets. These are the supreme moments of the spring, consecrated to the loves of bird and blossom. Every little winged form that scarcely bends the twig has its all-consuming passion, and every tree its wedding of the flower. Out in the orchard the apple-trees are laden in veritable domes of pink-white bloom, as if by the rare spectacle of a rosy fall of snow, and from among the dewy petals the army of bees give forth their low, continuous drone – that sympathetic chord in the universal harmony of spring. How they revel in that rich harvest! Who knows what sweet messages are borne from flower to flower upon those filmy wings?

On the green slope beneath, the scattered dandelions gleam

like drops of molten gold upon the velvety sward, and a lounging family group, intent upon that savory noonday relish, gather the basketfuls of the dainty plants for that appetizing “mess of greens.” Often, while thus engaged, have I stopped to watch the antics of the festive bumblebee, tumbling around in the tufted blossom – always an amusing sight. See how he rolls and wallows in the golden fringe, even standing on his head and kicking in his glee! Presently, with his long black nose thrust deep into the yellow puff, he stops to enjoy a quiet snooze in the luxurious bed – an endless sleep, for I generally took this chance to put him out of his misery, preferring, perhaps, to watch the robin hopping across the lawn. Now he stops, and seems to listen; runs a yard or so, and listens again, and without a sign of warning dips his head, and pulls upon an unlucky angle-worm that much prefers to go the other way. It is a well-known fact that angle-worms approach the surface of their burrows at the sound of rain-drops on the earth above. I sometimes wonder if the robin in its quick running stroke of foot intends to simulate that sound, and thus decoy its prey.

I remember the wild tumult of a troop of boys upon the hill-side, tracking the swarming bees as they whirled along in a living tangle against the sky, now loosening in their dizzy meshes, now contracting in a murmuring hum around their queen, and finally settling on a branch in a pendent bunch about her. So tame and docile, too! seeming utterly to forget their fiery javelins as they hung in that brown filmy mass upon the bending bough!

“A swarm of bees in May iz wuth a load o’ hay.” So said our neighbor, as with fresh clean hive he secured that prized equivalent. Here they are soon at home again, and we see their steady winged stream pouring out through the little door of their treasure-house, and the continual arrival of the little dusty plunderers, laden with their smuggled store of honey, and their saddle-bags replete with stolen gold. Down near the brook they find a land of plenty, literally flowing with honey, as the luxuriant drooping clusters of the locust-trees yield their brimful nectaries to the impetuous, murmuring swarm. But there is no lack now of flowery sweets for this buzzing colony. On every hand the meadow-sweets and milkweeds, the brambles, and the fragrant creeping-clover show their alluring colors in the universal burst of bloom, and not one escapes its tender pillaging.



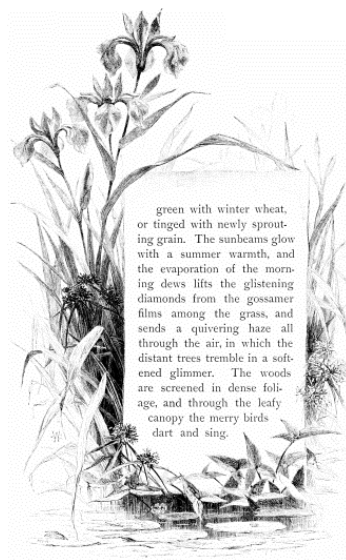
Up in the woods the gray has turned to tender green. The flowering dog-wood has spread its layers of creamy blossoms, giving the signal for the planting of the corn, and in the furrowed field we see that dislocated “man of straw,” with old plug hat jammed down upon his face, with wooden backbone sticking through his neck-band, and dirty thatch for a shirt bosom – a mocking outrage on any crow’s sagacity. Those glittering strips of tin, too! Could you but interpret the low croaking of the leader of that sable gang in yonder tree, you might hear of the appalling effect of these precautions. I heard him once as I sat quietly beneath a forest tree, and in the light of later events I readily recalled his remarks upon the occasion: “Say, fellers! look at that

old fool down there hanging out those tins to show us where his corn is planted. Haw! haw! I swaw! cawn! cawn! we'll go down thaw and take a chaw!" And they did; and they perched upon that old plug hat, and looked around for something to get scared about. A single look at a crow shows that he has a long head, and it is not all mouth either.



Every day now makes a transformation in the landscape. The golden stars upon the lawn are nearly all burnt out: we see their downy ashes in the grass. Their virgin flame is quenched, and naught remains but those ethereal globes of smoke that rise up

and float away with every breeze. Where is there in all nature's marvels a more exquisite creation than this evanescent phoenix of the dandelion? Beautiful in life, it is even more beautiful in death. And now the high-grown grass is cloudy with its puffs, whose little fairy parachutes are sailing everywhere, over mountain-top and field. Here the corn has appeared in little waving plumes, and the horse and cultivator are seen breaking up the soil between the rows. Great snowy piles of cloud throw their gliding shadows across the patchwork of ploughed fields and meadows, fresh and



green with winter wheat,
or tinged with newly sprout-
ing grain. The sunbeams glow
with a summer warmth, and
the evaporation of the morn-
ing dews lifts the glistening
diamonds from the gossamer
films among the grass, and
sends a quivering haze all
through the air, in which the
distant trees tremble in a soft-
ened glimmer. The woods
are screened in dense foli-
age, and through the leafy
canopy the merry birds
dart and sing.

BLUE-FLAGS.

The chickadees are here, and scarlet tanagers gleam like living bits of fire among the tantalizing leaves. Pert little vireos hop inquisitively about you, and the bell note of the wood-thrush echoes from the hidden tree-top overhead. Perhaps, too, you may chance upon a downy brood of quail cuddling among the dry leaves; but, even though you should, you might pass them by unnoticed, except as a mildewed spot of fungus at the edge of a fallen log or tree-stump, perhaps. The loamy ground is shaded knee-deep with rank growth of wood plants. The mossy, speckled rock is set in a fringe of ferns. Palmate sprays of ginseng spread in mid-air a luxurious carpet of intermingled leaves, interspersed with yellow spikes of loosestrife and pale lilac blooms of crane's-bill; and the poison-ivy, creeping like a snake around that marbled beech, has screened its hairy trunk beneath its three-cleft shiny leaves. The mountain-laurel, with its deep green foliage and showy clusters, peers above that rocky crag; and in the bog near by a thicket of wild azalea is crowned with a profusion of pink blossoms.

Out in the swamp meadow the tall clumps of boneset show their dull white crests, and the blue flowers of the flag, the mint, and pickerel weed deck the borders of the lily pond. The waddling geese let off their shrieking calliopes as they sail out into the stream, or browse with nodding twitch along the grassy bank. Swarms of yellow butterflies disgrace their kind as they huddle around the greenish mud-holes, and we hear on every side the "z-zip, z-zip," amidst the din of a thousand crickets

and singing locusts among the reeds and rushes. The meadows roll and swell in billowy waves, bearing like a white-speckled foam upon their crests a sea of daisies, with here and there a floating patch of crimson clover, or a golden haze of butter-cups. Rising suddenly from the tall grass near by, the gushing brimful bobolink crowds a half-hour's song into a brief pell-mell rapture, beating time in mid-air with his trembling wings, and alighting on the tall fence-rail to regain his breath. A coy meadow-lark shows his yellow-breast and crescent above the windrow yonder, and we hear the ringing beats of whetted scythes, and see the mowers cut their circling swath.

Mowing! Why, how is this? This surely is not Spring. But even thus the Springtime leads us into Summer. No eye can mark the soft transition, and ere we are aware the sweet fragrance of the new-mown hay breathes its perfumed whisper, "Behold, the Spring has fled!"

SUMMER





“ALL out for Hometown.” There is an epidemic of eagerness, a general bustle for satchels and bundles, and the car is soon almost without a passenger; and, indeed, it would really seem as though the whole train had landed its entire human burden upon this platform; for Hometown is a popular place, and every Saturday evening brings just such an exodus as this: Husbands and fathers who fly from the hot and crowded city for a Sunday of quiet and content with their families, who year after year have found a refuge of peace and comfort in this charming New England town. Where is it? Talk with almost any one familiar with the picturesque boroughs of the Housatonic, and

your curiosity will be gratified, for this village will be among the first to be described.

From the platform of the car we step into the midst of a motley assemblage, rustic peasantry and fashionable aristocracy intermingled. Anxious and eager faces meet you at every turn. For a few minutes the air fairly rings with kisses, as children welcome fathers, and fathers children. Strange vehicles crowd the depot – vehicles of all sizes and descriptions, from the veritable “one-hoss shay” to the dainty basket-phaeton of fashion. One by one the merry loads depart, while I, a pilgrim to my old home, stand almost unrecognized by the familiar faces around me. Leaning up against the porch near by, stands a character which, once seen, could never be forgotten. His face is turned from me, but the old straw hat I recognize as the hat of ten years ago, with brim pulled down to a slope in front, and pushed up vertically behind, and the identical hole in the side with the long hair sticking through. Yes, there he stands – Amos Shoopegg. I step up to him and lay my hand upon his shoulder. With creditable skill he unwinds the twist of his intricate legs, and with an inquiring gaze turns his good-natured face toward me.

“Is it possible that you don’t remember me, Shoop?”

With an expression of surprise he raises both his arms. “Wa’al, thar! I swaiou! I didn’t cal’late on runnin’ agin yeu. I was jes drivin’ hum from taown-meetin’, an’ thought as haow I’d take a turn in, jest out o’ cur’osity. Wa’al, naow, it’s pesky good to see yeu agin arter sech a long spell. I didn’t recognize ye at fust,

but I swan when ye began a-talkin', that was enuf fer me. Hello! fetched yer woman 'long tew, hey? Haow air yeu, ma'am? hope ye'er perty tol'ble. Don't see but what yeu look's nateral's ever; but yer man here, I declar for't, he got the best on me at fust;" and after having thus delivered himself, he swallowed up our hands in his ample fists.

"Yes, Shoop, I thought I'd just run up to the old home for a few days."

"Wa'al, I swar! I'm tarnal glad to see ye, and that's a fact. Anybody cum up arter ye? No? Well, then, s'posin' ye jest highst into my team." So saying, he unhitched a corrugated shackle-jointed steed, and backed around his indescribable impromptu covered wagon – a sort of a hybrid between a "one-hoss shay" and a truck.

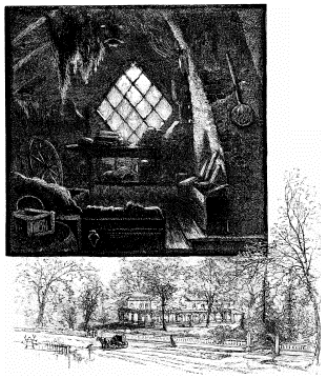
"Tain't much of a kerridge fer city folks to ride in, that's a fact," he continued, "but I cal'late it's a little better'n shinnin' it." After some little manœuvring in the way of climbing over the front seat, we were soon wedged in the narrow compass, and, with an old horse-blanket over our knees, we went rattling down the hill toward the village and home of my boyhood.

Years have passed since those days when, as a united family, we dwelt under that old roof; but those who once were children are now men and women, with divided interests and individual homes. The old New England mansion is now a homestead only in name, known so only in recollections of the past and the possibilities of the future.

“Wa’al, thar’s the old house,” presently exclaimed Amos, as we neared the brow of a declivity looking down into the valley below. “Don’t look quite so spruce as’t did in the old times, but Warner’s a good keerful tenant, ’tain’t no use talkin’. I cal’late ye might dig a pleggy long spell afore ye could git another feller like him in this ’ere patch.”

In the vale below, in its nest of old maples and elms, almost screened from view by the foliage, we look upon the familiar outlines of the old mansion, its diamond window in the gable peering through the branches at us. “Skedup!” cried Amos, as he urged his pet nag into a jog-trot down the hill, through the main street of the town. The long fence in front of the homestead is soon reached, a sharp turn into the drive, a “Whoa, January!” and we are extricated from the wagon.

“Wa’al, I’ll leave ye naow. I guess ye kin find yer way around,” said Shoop, as with one outlandish geometrical stride he lifted himself into the wagon. Cordially greeted by our hostess, with repeated urgings to “make ourselves at home,” we were shown to our room. The house, though clad in a new dress, still retained the same hospitable and cosy look as of old.



OLD HOMESTEAD AND GARRET.

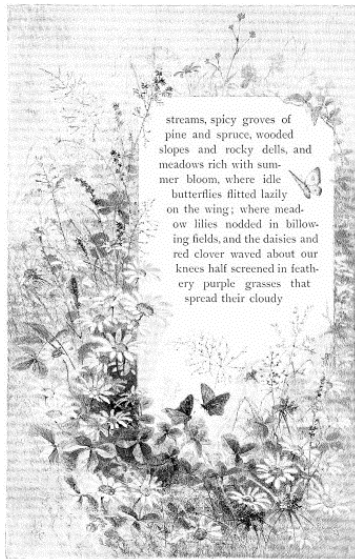
Hometown, owing to some early local faction, is divided into two sections, forming two distinct towns. One, Newborough, a hill-top hamlet, with its picturesque long street, a hundred feet in width, and shaded with great weeping elms that almost meet overhead; and the other, Hometown proper, a picturesque little village in the valley, cuddling close around the foot of a precipitous bluff, known as Mount Pisgah. A mile's distance separates the two centres. The old homestead is situated in the heart of Hometown, fronting on the main street. The house itself is a series of after-thoughts, wing after wing and gable after gable having clustered around the old nucleus, as the growth of new generations necessitated increased accommodation. Its outward aspect is rather modern, but the interior, with its broad open fireplaces, and accessories in the shape of cranes

and fire-dogs, is rich with all the features of typical New England; and the two gables of the main roof enclose the dearest old garret imaginable – at present an asylum for the quaint possessions of antique furniture and bric-à-brac, removed from their accustomed quarters on the advent of the new host. It is to this sanctuary that my footsteps first lead me, and, with a longing that will not be withstood, I find myself in front of the great white door. I lift the latch; a cool pungent odor of oak wood greets me as I ascend the steep stairs – an odor that awakens, like magic, a hundred fancies, and recalls a host of memories long forgotten. Every stair seems to creak a welcome, as when, on the rainy days of long ago, we sought the cosy refuge to hear the patter on the roof, or to nestle in the dark, obscure corners in our childish games. At the head of the stairs rises the ancient chimney, cleft in twain at the foot, with the quaint little cuddy between. Above me stretch the great beams of oak, like iron in their hardness. Yonder is the queer old diamond window looking out upon the village church, its panes half obscured by the dusty maze of webs. To the left, in a shadowy corner, stands the antiquated wheel – a relic of past generations. Long gray cobwebs festoon the rafters overhead, and the low buzzing of a wasp betrays its mud nest in the gable above. A sense of sadness steals over me as I sit gazing into this still chamber. On every side are mementos of a happy past, and all, though mute, speaking to me in a language whose power stirs the depths of my soul. Wherever the eye may turn, it meets with a silent greeting from an old friend, and the

whole shrouded in a weird gloom that lends to the most common object an air of melancholy mystery. And yet it is only a garret. There are some, no doubt, for whom this word finds its fitting synonyme in the dictionary, but there are others to whom it sings a poem of infinite sweetness.

Looking through the dingy window between the maple boughs, my eye extends over lawn and shrubberies, three acres in extent – a little park, overrun with paths in every direction, through ancient orchard and embowered dells, while far beyond are glimpses of the wooded knolls, the winding brook, and meadows dotted with waving willows, and farther still the ample undulating farm.

It is in such a place as this that I have sought recreation and change of scene. My wife and I have run away from the city for a month or so. A vacation we call it; but to an artist such a thing is rarely known in its ordinary sense, and often, indeed, it means an increase of labor rather than a respite. My first week, however, I had consecrated to luxurious idleness. Together we wandered through the old familiar rambles where as boy and girl in earlier days we had been so oft together. Day after day found us in some new retreat. There were dark cool nooks by sheltered



streams, spicy groves of
pine and spruce, wooded
slopes and rocky dells, and
meadows rich with sum-
mer bloom, where idle
butterflies flitted lazily
on the wing; where mead-
ow lilies nodded in billow-
ing fields, and the daisies and
red clover waved about our
knees half screened in feath-
ery purple grasses that
spread their cloudy

AMONG THE GRASSES.

mist all through the blossoming maze. We heard the music of the scythe, and, sitting in the deep cool grass beneath the maple shade, we watched the circling motion of the mowers in the field – saw the forkfuls of the hay tossed in the drying sun, and breathed the perfumed air that floated from the windrows. We sauntered by the meadow brook where willows gleamed along the bank, and overhanging alders threw their sombre shadows in the quiet pools: where the ground-nut, and the meadow-rue, and the creeping madder fringed the tangled brink, and every footstep started up some agile frog that plunged into the unseen

water. We stood where rippling shallows gurgled under festooned canopies of fox-grape, and the leaning linden-trees shut out the sky o'erhead and intertwined their drooping branches above the gliding current. Here, too, the weather-beaten crossing-pole makes its tottering span across the stream, and deep down beneath the bank the rainbow-tinted sunfish floats on filmy fins above his yellow bed of gravel, and we catch a flashing gleam of a silvery dace or shiner turning in the water.

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