

THE RIVER.

All is changing in the valley,
Save with you, familiar stream;
You have still the morning music,
You have still the sylvan dream.

Year by year the woods diminish,
And the hillsides grow more bare,
Landmarks fade and new roads circle,
Orchards die that once were fair.

Pastures, with the burnt logs tumbled
Thick by many a crooked pass,
Where the berry bushes reddened,
Now are smooth and clothed in grass.

Brown barns nestled in the meadows,
To the moss have gone below,
And the old house by the well-sweep
Fell, they tell me, long ago.

And new mansions bright and stately,
Flowerly yards and hedges green,
Towering barns with bays capacious
By the roadside now are seen.

All is changing in the valley,
Save with you, familiar stream,
You have still the morning music,
You have still the sylvan dream.

For the willow and the alder
Bend above your tireless tide,
And the great elm waves its branches,
Far aloft in knightly pride.

And the brook's sunny tresses
O'er you in the wind are swung,
And the cherry tree's white blossoms
On your breast are lightly flung.

When the moving mist of morning
O'er your face is closely spread,
Clearly sings your kinsman, robin,
In your elm tree overhead.

In their firm and ancient places
Are your boulders, when the sun
Tracks the lengthened days of summer,
And your currents lowly run.

And your darkened waters ripple
By the hemlock's shady glade,
Where the moist air holds the whispers
That primeval seasons made.

All is changing in the valley,
Save with you, familiar stream;
You have still the morning music,
You have still the sylvan dream.

Knowlton, Q. C. L. CLEVELAND.

AN OLD MAID'S CONFESSION.

By "ISIDORE."

Author of "Voices from the Hearth," "An Emigrant's Story," "An Old Miser's Story," etc., etc.

CHAPTER V.

A DISCOVERY.

In the meantime, there was many a whispered conference between Mrs. Dufresne and Frank, and he was often so absorbed amongst his books, that he paid us less attention than usual. We had grown so accustomed to his society, that we missed it. Wondering at his frequent absence, and endeavouring to account for it, one day the subject of my thoughts suddenly accosted me. It was an early summer's morning, and, as usual, I was seated under the weird and gnarled old oak tree, whose wide-spreading branches formed an umbrageous shelter. The luxury of its beautiful shade gladdened me. I could mark "the lazy-pacing clouds" through the interlacing boughs. I felt sweet currents of warm air sweep over me. I heard the happy twitterings of the birds nesting near me, and my busy fingers, over woman's soothing occupation—needlework—seemed to keep time and tune to my thoughts.

"So here you are!" said Frank, looking intently into my face, and seating himself on the seat. "I have been looking for you everywhere."

"Indeed," I answered, as unconcernedly as possible.

"I have something very particular to say to you, Miss Agnes," continued Frank, and again he fixed his bright, searching gaze on me. "In the first place, I am going to leave you all."

Not knowing the full purport of these words, "I am going to leave you all," a feeling of sadness and dismay seized me, which somehow stopped the answer I was about to give him.

"Don't look so concerned," said Frank, drawing closer to me. "It is only for a time; I shall soon return."

This answer relieved me. He did not then intend to leave the shores of England, and it was only a temporary absence. "I did not think you were going away so soon," I said. "Is the business urgent?"

"In one sense, it is," answered Frank. "Let me tell you all about it." And then, as he quietly placed his hand in mine, I instinctively felt that he had requited the love which I had secretly treasured for him, and that already he was about to confide his plans to my keeping. Folding this bright assurance around my heart, I listened to him with that full joy which even now after the lapse of so many years throws a halo over these pages. "You must know, Agnes, that I consider myself a very fortunate fellow; my desultory reading has had this effect upon me—it has kindled high aspirations for my future. Now the majority of young men who are similarly affected by books, seldom possess the means to carry out their high aspirations. Fortune has enabled me to do so. An old relation of my mother's has unexpected-

ly left us well off. I have taken a fancy to the profession of a barrister, and I am now off to London to make arrangements for my studies; but I shall come down here again before finally entering on them. Do you think I shall succeed, and 'win my spurs'?"

"I am sure you will, Frank," I replied. "You have all the elements of success in your nature."

"I hope so," he said; "but the race is not always to the swift. Anyway, I mean to try with might and main, and if I fail, it will be from no lack of trying to succeed."

I felt certain of his success, and I rejoiced that he did not intend to fritter away the best days of his existence in aims without purpose, or plans without reason. Dear as he had become to me, I shared his hopes, and felt triumphant already, as I imagined the fame he would win in the career he had chosen for himself. I said, "We shall miss you, Frank. You are right in taking this step," I continued; "a life without an energetic pursuit is not a manly life, and the best wishes of your dear friends will accompany you to incite you—that is, if you need an incentive."

"I need them all," he said, "and I need yours especially, Agnes," and he pressed my hand warmly. I am certain I returned this pressure, I am positive I clasped his hand with the fervour, the trust, the love which I felt for him; and when he left me to the solitude of my happy thoughts, although he had not said that to me which I should have liked him to have said, still, his manner and behaviour had quite convinced me that I had not loved him in vain. Gazing now, as I write, into the depths of that mysterious past, I can recall no sweeter moments of existence than the hour after this interview with my lover.

All that day, whenever I was alone, I nursed the brightest hopes for his sake. The aspirations that he felt for himself had become woven in my own being. All the plans of his future had somehow become my own plans. Kingsley says that "men must work and women must weep," which evidently must mean action for the sterner, and suffering for the gentler sex. "Laborare est orare" is the Latin proverb. The conflict with life's hard duties, the struggle to obtain the mastery over endeavour, must be accounted the privilege of mankind, whilst to us belong the silent waiting, the tearful prayers for those dear to us, who are striving to reach the goal for our sakes. And so already my thoughts, for my lover's future had grown into earnest aspirations, commingled with the anxious doubts and fears—always their concomitants in a woman's nature. Already I lived more for him than for myself, and I think that I was the better and happier for it all.

Next day he left us. The hours before the one of his departure seemed to pass quicker than usual. Time always hurries when we wish it to amble. The inevitable moment came at last; we were all assembled in the drawing-room, and he was about to bid us good-bye. He kissed his mother, shook hands with my grandmother and Flora, and then came over to where I was sitting. I dared not look him in the face, as I was afraid my eyes might betray my sadness. He grasped my hand warmly, and gently pressed it to his lips. In another minute he was gone. We all watched his lithe form bound into the vehicle that was to take him to the railway station, and as the rattle of the carriage-wheels faded in the distance, a dim sense of loneliness took possession of me. For the first time in my life an unwonted dullness, not easily defined, crept over me. I did not try to shake it off; I could not have done so if I had tried; and so I yielded to the vague impression which beset me, allowing it to overcome me, feeling that this sadness, piercing me like a pain, was still touched with some ineffable, far-off sweetness which was the glad consciousness that I was beloved by him whose very departure made this happiness so keenly palpable. And yet, when he had gone, this feeling was almost mastered by the misery occasioned by the blank he left in our household. I could not accustom myself to the change. Absence is the great test of real affection. We never know how dear anybody is till he is missed; his worth becomes then re-estimated. Remembrance re-casts all his virtues and excellencies. The void caused by his departure is only filled up by regret. The chair the absent one sat in, the music he admired, the poem he loved, the walk he favoured, all suddenly become impressively dear to us—because they were his associations. Everything is hallowed with the sadness caused by his absence. We live over again the happy days, but regret tinges all our thoughts. And so, when Frank left us, it was as if some one had sharply wrested some sweetness out of my life. The void around seemed centred within myself. The joy of knowing he loved me increased this void, and for a while depressed me, until a new care arose to awaken thought in another direction.

CHAPTER VI.

A REVELATION.

There are certain characters in this Protean human world whose presence exercises genial thoughts, and whose absence, therefore, creates more than a void in the household.

Frank was one of these characters. Perhaps my own feelings for him have over-estimated his influence.

The being who is throned in our hearts is there by virtue of his being "king of men" to

us, since he is crowned with the glory of a woman's unselfish love!

"What is the matter with Flora?" said my grandmother to me, later in the day. "Is she ill? I don't know what ails the child of late."

My grandmother's question at once banished my thoughts from the selfish groove where they had been wandering lately, and filled them with a vague anxiety about my sister. "Do you think so, grandmother?" I answered. "She is certainly not so gay as usual, but I don't think she is ill."

"There has been too much fuss here lately—too much excitement for the child. She wants more repose. Look to her, Agnes." My conscience reproached me. Had my devotion to Flora waned of late? Had a new love so engrossed my thoughts as to shut out my solicitude for my sister from them? Had that inherent selfishness which, I presume, is strongly rooted in all natures, fastened itself into mine? In my loyalty to him had I been disloyal to her?

I obeyed my grandmother, and sought Flora. I found her in the bedroom. She did not hear the approach of my steps. She was seated by the window; her face wore a dreamy, abstracted expression; there was a wan, listless look about her eyes, and her work lay untouched by her side. "Flora, dear, what is the matter?" I asked.

My words disturbed her reverie, and for some reason, which to me was unexplainable, brought a painful flush to her cheeks. "Nothing is the matter. Why, what should be the matter?" said Flora, parrying my question with another.

"Where have you been hiding yourself? What makes you so dull? You can't be well, my darling!" I spoke these words, and then hastened near her, and in my old, familiar, sisterly way, clasped my arm around her waist.

"Only a little headache and a little weariness," retorted my sister, averting her eyes from mine, as if she feared I would gaze too searchingly into her face. "Don't question me; leave me to myself, Agnes," and as she said this, there was actually a petulance in the tones of her voice. These words added to my anxiety, for my light-hearted sister seldom spoke harshly.

Fearing that even my society might tend to increase her nervous ailment, I was about to obey her wish and leave her, when she called me back.

"Don't go, Agnes," she said. "I am so stupid. Stop and talk to me."

I seized hold of the first topic that occurred to me, a topic of universal interest to all our sex—namely, dress. Our kind-hearted grandmother had surprised us with a piece of fashionable material, and we forthwith discussed in what style we should have it made. I need not tell my fair readers that our earnest discussion, beyond beguiling an hour, led to no permanent decision upon this momentous question. And yet somehow I seemed to have all the talk to myself. Even the delightful topic of a new dress failed to arouse Flora from the lethargic oppression that seemed to beset her, and so I ventured upon another one.

"Did you see Dr. Ponder, my dear, when he was here lately?"

"No, I did not," answered Flora. "He did not come to see me. I don't want him. Mrs. Dufresne is the invalid that engages his attention. Is she really very ill?"

"She fancies she is, which is the same thing. I wonder Dr. Ponder don't get bored with her interminable recitals," I said.

"He does get bored," replied Flora; "his looks betray his sense of boredom. But I think, for all that, he likes coming here, and I know why. You have something to do with his coming here so often—what do you say to that?"

"What an idea! What have I to do with his visits? He is deeply concerned about Mrs. Dufresne. Hers is a curious case, that requires exceptional treatment and numerous visits to understand." I had actually interested my sister at last. The topic of the Doctor and our guest had really proved of greater interest than the topic of dress, and so I began to grow hopeful. "Poor Mrs. Dufresne," I continued, "how she must miss her son."

"Do you think so?" replied Flora. "I wonder if Mrs. Dufresne is really ill, because if she is not Dr. Ponder ought to tell her so."

Getting tired of this irrepressible doctor, I commenced to converse upon a pleasanter theme—Frank's absence. "Does not the house seem dull without Frank? We have never been so lively before in our lives, and he was the occasion of it all."

My darling, evidently not heeding my words, still harped upon the irrepressible Doctor and Mrs. Dufresne.

"I wonder what sort of medicine he administers? because if she really is not ill the physic would do her harm, and no doctor would be so cruel as to do this."

"Never mind Doctor Ponder," I answered. "How quiet everything is without Frank. Don't you miss him as much as we all do?" My arm was clasped round my darling, and, as I spoke these last words, it may have been my fancy, but I am sure she trembled, and her face suddenly blanched. "You don't speak, my love; what is the matter?" And in my fond solicitude I pressed her more closely and warmly.

Then she could not contain herself any longer. "Frank—Frank—" she stammered. "I—" and bursting at last into an uncontrollable sob, she wept in my arms. Now I understood her dread when I mentioned Frank's name, and why she kept harping on the Doctor. Then the truth at once flashed upon my mind.

My sister loved my Frank. Unconsciously she had become my rival. Unknowingly to him and to me she had set his image up in her heart to worship it. How can I now trace on paper what I felt, when as my sister rushed into my arms, this truth, in all its sad significance, burst upon me! At first, this knowledge seemed to pierce me like a sudden agonising physical pain; then, as the misery of the surprise wasted itself away, all thought, all feeling, merged into one undying resolution, fiercer and stronger than my love. Still with my darling in my arms, still hearing her sobs, which were the heart-cries of that which she had tried to keep secret, and recognising in them her appeal to my sympathy, during those dreadful moments for both of us, thank God! only one strong, unalterable purpose mastered every other thought—never, never to my dying day would I betray what had now been revealed to me. I must renounce my own love forever for the sake of the trembling darling weeping in my arms. I pacified her as only a woman can pacify; I begged her to be of good cheer; I bade her hope.

I do not like to dwell, even in these records, on a scene which at the time was fraught with unspeakable suffering to me, and yet I even wonder myself now, when time has softened the harrowing thoughts which the scene evoked, how I can indite my impressions so calmly and placidly. But I have nothing to reproach myself with, and so I can still think reverently of those so closely interested with my life's history, so that these memories which cluster thickly in my brain may be tinged with pain, but never with any regret.

CHAPTER VII.

A DECLARATION.

A few days afterwards I received an interesting letter from Frank, full of London gossip, and which stated that he had completed his arrangements to commence his studies, and that he intended to pay us another visit before bidding us farewell, perhaps for some time.

Somehow I did not look forward to his coming with the old, pleasurable expectation. But a short while before his letter would have thrilled me with a keen longing to have welcomed him, and now circumstances that often mock human hopes made me almost dread to meet him. The last time I was in his company I longed for words that were never uttered, and now I prayed that their utterance might never reach my ears.

When he appeared amongst us, to my fancy a new light of manly purpose to will and to do seemed to radiate his smiling face; the sounds of his voice were tuned to gladdening hopefulness; and though he freely talked to us all, he always directly appealed to me for my opinion whenever he spoke.

No doubt your critical acumen, O reader, would have discovered numerous flaws and blemishes in Frank's nature; I loved him, and so he was my adorable hero.

Now, whenever his face beamed its thoughts on mine, or his hopeful glances followed my own, whenever his light-hearted step, or his merry-toned laugh broke on my quietude, the shadow of my sister's love came between him and me, and compelled me to avoid him. Did he notice the change in my demeanour towards him?

Not at first, as he was too busy in making himself generally agreeable; but afterwards he did so, and his surprise on this point betrayed itself one afternoon.

I had taken my work, and had seated myself with Flora, under the old oak tree, when he quietly approached us. My sister, muttering some excuse about having left her thimble upstairs, suddenly left us. I was about to ask her not to move, thus postponing the inevitable understanding between my lover and myself. But on second thoughts, I resolved not to do so. The hard and relentless task of disappointing the one I loved had to be performed. Why should I flinch from my cruel duty? Sooner or later the words consigning him to wretchedness would have to be spoken. It was but a question of time, and it was only right that I should not temporise with his feelings. And what a pleasant afternoon it was! The dreamy shadows of the summer's day slanting themselves before us; the faint whispers of a soft breeze surging through the tremulous branches over our heads, like sweet lullabys of far-off children's voices; while now and again the happy silence was broken by the birds' twittering notes and musical pipings. Even during the few brief moments before he spoke, the gladness of that summer's afternoon impressed me as no other afternoon has ever done, or ever will do.

"Agnes," he said, "what makes you so *distraite*? and I fancy you have avoided me lately, though perhaps it is only fancy."

"Did you not know," I answered, "that it is our sex's privilege to be capricious at times? you should not observe me so closely."

"Can I help it, and don't you know I cannot help it?" and saying this, his searching, bright eyes pierced mine.

At any other time, woman-like, I would have professed not to have understood his meaning; I would have sought to prolong an interview, which might have been fraught with "linked sweetness, long drawn out." On this memorable afternoon I only wished to hear what he had to tell, and then to resolutely summon all my courage, and do my duty. Casting my eyes away from his, so that their shining light of love might not, after all, quell holier feelings