

## THE WANDERING MINSTREL.

" . . . She chanted snatches of old tunes." Hamlet: Act iv.; Sc. 7.



HERE are words and expressions which, say as we may, have about them a certain wizardry. Somehow or other—and the Law of Mental Association does not explain all—they throw a glamor over us, and we are at their mercy.

As the scent of a bouquet thrown off from some whirling *danseuse* will take us away from the glare of the ball-room, back to some long-ago and much-loved garden, there are expressions which, despite ourselves, have the power of throwing us into moods and states of mind out of which emerge, called up as by a magician's wand, dreams and phantasms, more real than we at first may be inclined to admit.

I have been induced to make these remarks by the subject of the present sketch. It seems to me that "The Wandering Minstrel" is an expression of the uncanny sort. For since I sat down at my desk, with these three words at the head of my paper, vision after vision has not ceased to pass before me.

I have seen Orpheus, and all nature dancing to his music; the mountains stepping it in a stately minuet, the oaks kicking up their roots and waltzing with birches, the royal lion forgetting his dignity in the rapture of a double shuffle, and the lower animals wild in the restless whirl of a reel. I have beheld old Homer, deep-browed and millon-wrinkled, rolling out to the melody of his lyre that deathless music which whilom he sang to the *brool* of the restless *Ægean*. I have had a vision of the tents of a Danish camp, in the midst of which, under a spreading tree, sat King Alfred, the "Darling of the English" and well named the Great, harping, like a bearded David, to Guthrum at his tent door, a very Saul of an evil spirit. I have been present at the board of our Anglo-Saxon forefathers, when the snow was at the door and the wind in the chimney, and have heard, as the wassail-bowl went round the hall, the far-wandered gleeman with streaming hair, his back to the logs piled high on the blazing hearth, with wild gestures and a wilder eye, pour forth to the twanging of a harp his torrent of melody till the old hall re-echoed with shouts, and the war-cry rebounded from the smoky roof. I have listened to the same gleeman, when the snows were away and the wind was low, singing of love and chivalry, under the summer oak, to the blue-eyed maidens and yellow-haired lads of old England.

Visions, too, I have had of poor Louise, the gle maiden, with sword in hand and viol by her side, wandering from cottage door to castle gate, with the lay of the woodland walk ever on her lips, and of that aged minstrel, called the last by him who was a later and a greater singer in Newark's tower, garlanded with its woods, of Teviot's Flower and Branksome Hall:

"While Yarrow, as he roll'd along,  
Bore burden to the minstrel's song."

And now I see Oliver of "The Deserted Village," the happy-go-lucky, the all-lovable, fluting in the market-place of a French village as the sun goes down to dark-eyed children in well-worn sabots and old men in much-mended blouses. Surely, since Time was young, and the god Pan piped, far in the forest, to gleaming nymph and reeling

satyr, the world has never seen so strange a wandering minstrel.

A wandering minstrel! as I write the enchanted words, memory, flashing her inextinguishable lamp upon the past, reveals far back the figure of a wandering minstrel, none other than that of Fiddler Henry, to me, at least, the indispensable of our village Fair. In a dusky cloak and a bell-crowned hat, white as the locks that stream down his back like a mountain-torrent, with heavy beard and glowing eye, mouthing out to the melody of his fiddle his tales of love and war, he is a poet and a minstrel every fibre of him.

Ah, Fiddler Henry! by thy side I have stood a sanguine and trustful child, regardless alike of merry-go-rounds and ginger-bread stalls, from the time that the sun came over the eastern hill until in my eyes thou wast apotheosized amid the glare of naphtha lamps and the circle of lads and lassies whirling dizzily to thy wild minstrelsy, when the unwelcome tidings came that it was long past bed-time, and, with visions of the day when I should have a fiddle and a bell-crowned hat, I walked down the single street of the quaint old village, not altogether heedless of the evening star that hung high above the pines, and the orange light that was dying away in the west.

Sad was that Fair day which came, and with it no Fiddler Henry. Hither and thither in the market-place I rushed, but nowhere was he to be seen. In despair I ventured to ask about him of an old candy wife to whom on by-gone Fair days I had seen him speaking. It was long ere I made the withered beldame understand, for she must needs think that a bairn can want nothing but barley-sugar or treacle candies. At last she exclaimed, "Harry the Fiddler, my bairn! ken ye na' hoo the puir body was smoor'd i' the snaw last New Year's night abune Yarrow?" I understood enough; Fiddler Henry had gone away and was never coming back to the Fair, and disconsolate I hurried from the market-place.

Surely I was right when I said that some expressions throw a glamor as of wizardry over us, and that "The Wandering Minstrel" is one of these. It has charmed me like a spell; it has said, "open sesame!" to my heart's treasure care. And now, as I bid adieu to the wandering minstrels who have been with me to-night, I am somewhat sad. As Fiddler Henry leaves me, it is, indeed, as if a bit of myself were going out into the windy night; and, laying down my pen and watching the flickering fire, while snatches of his old songs flit as bats about dark brain corners, I cannot but feel something strangely impressive in the fact that the song is with us when the singer is away, that the melody lives when the hand that guided the bow is still beneath a snow-wreath. Something strangely impressive indeed! yet herein catch we not a glimpse of the meaning of the whole thing?

"A great while ago the world began,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,"

and ever since, in windy weather and on rainy days all alike, there have been minstrels and minstrelsy. Long before troubadour sang, or Orpheus piped, the cataract blew its trumpet from the steep and the wind its thousand bugles up the fells, the nightrigale shook out her music to the moon, and the summer stream sang all night through to the listening oak. Ay, and before the "great while ago," ere the sigh of the wind and the splash of the rain