

THE FLOOD OF YEARS.

By WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT.

A mighty hand, from an exhaustless urn,
Pours forth the never-ending Flood of Years
Among the nations. How the rushing waves
Bear all before them! On their foremost edge,
And there alone, is Life: the Present there
Tosses and foams and fills the air with roar
Of mingled noises. There are they who toil
And they who strive, and they who feast, and they
Who hurry to and fro. The sturdy hind—
Woodman and delver with the spade—are there.
And busy artisan beside his bench,
And pallid student with his written roll.
A moment on the mounting billow seen—
The flood sweeps over them and they are gone.
There groups of revelers, whose brows are twined
With roses, ride the topmost swell awhile,
And as they raise their flowing cups to touch
The clinking brim to brim, are whirled beneath
The waves and disappear. I hear the jar
Of beaten drums, and thunders that break forth
From cannon, where the advancing billow sends
Up to the sight long files of armed men,
That hurry to the charge through flame and smoke.
The torrent bears them under, whelmed and hid,
Slayer and slain, in heaps of bloody foam.
Down go the steed and rider; the plumed chief
Sinks with his followers; the head that wears
The Imperial diadem goes down beside
The felon's with cropped ear and branded cheek.
A funeral train—the torrent sweeps away
Bearers and bier and mourners. By the bed
Of one who dies men gather sorrowing,
And women weep aloud; the flood rolls on;
The wail is stifled, and the sobbing group
Borne under. Hark to that shrill sudden shout—
The cry of an applauding multitude
Swayed by some loud-tongued orator who wields
The living mass, as if he were its soul.
The waters choke the shout and all is still,
Lo, next, a kneeling crowd and one who spreads
The hand in prayer; the engulfing wave o'er takes
And swallows them and him. A sculptor wields
The chisel, and the stricken marble grows
To beauty; at his easel, eager-eyed,
A painter stands, and sunshine at his touch
Gathers upon the canvas, and life glows;
A poet, as he paces to and fro,
Murmurs his sounding lines. Awhile they ride
The advancing billow, till its tossing crest
Strikes them and flings them under while their tasks
Are yet unfinished. See a mother smile
On her young babe that smiles to her again—
The torrent wrecks it from her arms; she shrieks,
And weeps, and midst her tears is carried down.
A beam like that of moonlight turns the spray
To glistening pearls; two, lovers, hand in hand,
Rise on the billowy swell and fondly look
Into each other's eyes. The rushing flood
Flings them apart; the youth goes down; the maid,
With hands outstretched in vain and streaming eyes,
Waits for the next high wave to follow him.
An aged man succeeds; his bending form
Sinks slowly; mingling with the sullen stream
Gleam the white locks and then are seen no more.
Lo, wider grows the stream; a sea-like flood
Saps earth's walled cities; massive palaces
Crumble before it; fortresses and towers
Dissolve the swift waters; populous realms,
Swept by the torrent, see their ancient tribes
Engulfed and lost, their very languages
Stifled and never to be uttered more.

I pause and turn my eyes and, looking back,
Where that tumultuous flood has passed, I see
The silent Ocean of the Past, a waste
Of waters weltering over graves, its shores
Strewn with the wreck of fleets, where mast and hull
Drop away piecemeal; battlemented walls
Frown idly, green with moss, and temples stand
Unroofed, forsaken by the worshippers.
There lie memorial stones, whence time has gnawed
The graven legends, thrones of kings o'erturned,
The broken altars of forgotten gods,
Foundations of old cities and long streets
Where never fall of human foot is heard
Upon the desolate pavement. I behold
Dim glimmerings of lost jewels far within
The sleeping waters, diamond, sardonyx,
Ruby and topaz, pearl and chrysolite,
Once glittering at the banquet on fair brows
That long ago were dust; and all around
Strewn on the waters of that silent sea,
Are withering bridal wreaths, and glossy locks
Shorn from fair brows by loving hands, and scrolls
O'erwritten, haply with fond words of love
And vows of friendship—and fair pages flung
Fresh from the printer's engine. There they lie
A moment and then sink away from sight.

I look, and the quick tears are in my eyes,
For I behold, in every one of these,
A blighted hope, a separate history
Of human sorrow, telling of dear ties
Suddenly broken, dreams of happiness
Dissolved in air, and happy days, too brief,
That sorrowfully ended, and I think
How painfully must the poor heart have beat
In bosoms without number, as the blow
Was struck that slew their hope or broke their peace.

Sadly I turn, and look before where yet
The Flood must pass, and I behold a mist
Where swarm dissolving forms, the brood of Hope,
Divinely fair, that rest on banks of flowers,
Or wander among rainbows, fading soon
And re-appearing, haply giving place
To shapes of grisly aspect, such as Fear
Moulds from the idle air; where serpents lift
The head to strike, and skeletons stretch forth
The bony arm in menace. Further on
A belt of darkness seems to bar the way,
Long, low and distant, where the Life that Is
Touches the Life to Come. The Flood of Years
Rolls toward it nearer and nearer. It must pass
That dismal barrier. What is there beyond?
Hear what the wise and good have said. Beyond
That belt of darkness still the years roll on
More gently, but with not less mighty sweep.
They gather up again and softly bear
All the sweet lives that late were overwhelmed
And lost to sight—all that in them was good,
Noble, and truly great and worthy of love—
The lives of infants and ingenuous youths,
Sages and saintly women who have made
Their households happy—all are raised and borne
By that great current in its onward sweep,
Wandering and rippling with caressing waves
Around green islands, fragrant with the breath
Of flowers that never wither. So they pass,
From stage to stage along the shining course
Of that fair river broadening like the sea.
As its smooth eddies curl along their way,
They bring old friends together; hands are clasped
In joy unspeakable; the mother's arms
Again are folded round the child she loved
And lost. Old sorrows are forgotten now,
Or but remembered to make sweet the hour
That overpays them; wounded hearts that bled
Or broke are healed forever. In the room
Of this grief-shadowed Present there shall be
A Present in whose reign no grief shall gnaw
The heart, and never shall a tender tie
Be broken—in whose reign the eternal Change
That waits on growth and action shall proceed
With everlasting Concord hand in hand.

A NEW LOVE TEST.

Pretty Margaret Nesbitt had two unexceptionable lovers, and sadly puzzled was she to choose between them—at least, so she pretended, as she gravely debated their respective merits, with her cousin and confidant, Phoebe Field. Certainly, if she had a preference, she kept her secret well guarded. A tall, handsome girl was Margaret—well formed and graceful. Full of mischief and spirit, she delighted in a frolic or a jest; and some there were who, judging her merely by some of the mad freaks in which she had been engaged, held her to be but a thoughtless, giddy girl. Yet the friends who knew her best discovered beneath her merry humour a fund of plain good sense, and true feeling, which won her both respect and love.

One evening, after returning from a party, where she had met both aspirants for her favour, Margaret sat thoughtfully by the fire in her dressing-room, her little white-slipped feet resting on the fender, and for the hundredth time debated the merits of her two lovers with Cousin Phoebe.

"You see, Phoebe," she continued, gravely, knitting her brow with an air of great perplexity, "each has his advantages. Hamilton Myers has so much talent—is handsome—of such a good family—and withal flatters me so charmingly, that I find him—very agreeable; on the other hand, though William North talks so much less, and lets me fairly pine and pout for a compliment, there is something so open, genial, and manly about him, that I think I like him almost, or quite as well as Mr. Myers."

"Then you are not in love with either?" asked Phoebe, a little annoyed by her friend's unromantic indecision.

"Not a bit, cousin—and what is more, I intend to keep myself heart-whole, at least till I ascertain which of my admirers loves me most worthily and sincerely. I wish I knew of some way to test the question."

"I heard of a case a few days ago, where the strength of a husband's affection was severely tried," said Phoebe. "My friend, Mrs. Comyns, had the small-pox during her husband's absence from home. Knowing herself to be frightfully disfigured—not a vestige left of her former beauty—she looked forward with dread to his return, fearing his feelings towards her might undergo a change. But I heard that, on the contrary, he seems more attached to her than ever, and seeks by a thousand little cares and attentions to show her that her misfortune has but made her more dear to him."

Tears rose in Margaret's clear hazel eyes at her friend's recital.

"That is true love," she cried with enthusiasm. "It is so that I want to be loved. I care little for the affection which springs from mere admiration of beauty. Oh, Phoebe, if I could but meet with such love—such a lover!"

She rose as she spoke, and the friends parted for the night.

On the morrow Margaret woke with a strange oppression in her head, a pain in her face, and a stiff neck; it was evident she had caught a severe cold at the party the night before. Though feeling very miserable, she rose and began to dress. Going to the glass to arrange her hair, she was shocked at the image it presented to her. The disproportionate swelling on one cheek had entirely destroyed the fair oval of her face; her eyes were dull and languid, and the colour had fled from her cheeks to find a lodging-place in her nose. While she was still gazing at herself in consternation, Phoebe entered the room.

Margaret drew her attention to her own rueful face in the mirror, exclaiming, "Did you ever see such a fright?"

Phoebe burst out laughing, and answered emphatically, "Never. Oh, Maggy, if your lovers could but see you now, what a fine chance to test the strength of their affection!"

She spoke in the merest jest; but the idea seemed to take hold of Margaret's mind. A wild project had entered her head, which she was determined to carry out. Cousin Phoebe was easily persuaded to enter into her plan, and became chief aider and abettor therein.

For about two weeks Margaret's cold, which was a very severe one, confined her to her room; during this time Phoebe occasionally saw, and replied in person to the inquiries of the two anxious lovers, who, on hearing of Miss Nesbitt's illness, daily called to ascertain the state of her health. I am sorry to say that Phoebe, with wanton cruelty, and little regard for truth, constantly represented that illness to be of the most serious nature, and the daily visits of two physicians gave confirmation to her statements.

In course of time, however, Miss Nesbitt was pronounced convalescent. Both lovers heard the good tidings with great apparent delight, and on the following day, Mr. Myers entrusted to Phoebe's care the following note—to be conveyed to her cousin—he waiting for an answer:—

"CHARMING MISS NESBITT,—

"I have suffered unspeakable anxiety on your account. When may I hope to see you? I am impatient to whisper to you a secret which has long hovered on my lips. Dearest Margaret, can you not divine it? Grant me an interview at once, I beseech you.

"Ever most faithfully yours,

"HAMILTON MYERS."

Margaret returned for answer the following hurried lines:—

"I will see you this evening at half-past eight o'clock—but prepare yourself to find me much changed by my illness."

It was already late when these words were written, and but an hour was allowed to our heroine to prepare her toilet to receive her lover. It was commenced at once; and it must be confessed was rather a singular one. In the first place, she withdrew all her rich hair from her face, and hid it beneath a close-fitting cap, such as sometimes disfigures ladies when some misfortune or illness compels them to have the hair shaved from the head. Next a loose wrapper of unbecoming style, and of a make which concealed the figure, was donned. So far had the toilet proceeded, when Phoebe entered the room; staring at the odd figure before her, she laughed long and merrily.

"You fright! you Medusa!" she cried: "you are enough to scare away the crows, let alone your lovers! Never fear but your trick will succeed."

"I have not yet done," cried Margaret, laughing as heartily as her friend. "Pray get me a raw beet root from the kitchen—I have my saffron leaves here."

The beet was soon produced; and Margaret proceeded, amid peals of laughter from both herself and cousin, to dye the tip of her nose a dark red with the beet juice, and to stain her pearly teeth yellow by chewing a few leaves of saffron. She next produced a small green patch, which she placed over one eye, as though she had had the misfortune to lose it through her illness, and her toilet was complete. When we add, however, that she was still pale from her late indisposition, and her face yet slightly disfigured by the swelling which had not entirely subsided, the reader will have no difficulty in realizing that she did look, as Phoebe said, like a perfect fright.

Before this unique toilet was entirely made, a ring at the door announced the arrival of the impatient lover. Margaret delayed to have one more hearty laugh with her cousin, and then proceeded demurely down-stairs. As she opened the parlour door, Mr. Myers sprang forward to meet her. He gained the middle of the room, and then stood as if spell-bound. Margaret advanced with grave self-possession, and extended her hand. The courtly Mr. Myers had not even presence of mind enough to take it.

"You find me greatly changed," said Margaret, in a tone of concern (she was something of an actress, and fully equal to the part she had undertaken): "I see you are shocked—I thought I had prepared you for the alteration in my appearance. Did you not receive my note this afternoon?"

"No—yes—I don't know," began Mr. Myers, so much confused that he did not know what he was saying. He was engaged in now glancing furtively at the fright before him, and then looking hastily away. At last partial self-possession returned to him. He seized his hat, stammering something about his time being short, and took leave.

"I trust you will not go till you have told me the secret you were so anxious to communicate," said Margaret, mischievously, managing to cut off his retreat to the door. "It is not late—pray return and make me the confidence you desired."

Poor Mr. Myers looked really alarmed.

"Not to-night—not to-night," he exclaimed, hurriedly, trying to effect an exit, and finding his attempts were frustrated by Margaret's manoeuvres. "It was a mere trifle—quite a mistake—any other time will do."

And at last gaining the door by a swift and dexterous movement, he fairly fled before the advancing Medusa, who still pertinaciously urged the revelation of the promised secret. As the hall door closed on him, Margaret's merry peals of laughter brought her cousin to her side; and the whole scene was faithfully rehearsed for Phoebe's amusement. While the merriment of the giddy girl, was at its height, and Margaret was just showing how Mr. Myers tried to dodge her at the door, another ring announced another visitor.

"There! that is surely William North—your other admirer," cried Phoebe.

Margaret's laughter suddenly died away; she grew very pale, and turned to fly precipitately to her own room. Thither she went, only pausing on the stairs long enough to decide by the sound of his footsteps that it was indeed Mr. North. Phoebe followed her. In vain Margaret endeavoured to affect the continuance of her late merry humour. Her uncontrollable agitation revealed even to the unsuspecting Phoebe that the question she was now about to test was to her a far different one from the last. Perceiving this, she sought to divert her friend from her intention. But Margaret was determined to carry her whim out—saying, "If it were fair for one, it is fair for the other—the love is worthless that will not bear my test."

She desired Phoebe, however, to go down and see Mr. North, inform him of her intention of receiving his visit, and prepare him for a change in her appearance. Phoebe soon returned from her errand; and then Margaret, gathering up her fortitude and composure, descended the stairs. Notwithstanding the amusement she had derived from Mr. Myers' precipitate retreat, its lesson had not been lost upon her; she trembled for the result of her wild stratagem—for though unconfessed to all, even to herself, the secret of her heart now revealed itself to her, by the tumult which agitated her bosom when she thought of how much she had staked on that venture.

On reaching the parlor door, she paused with her hand on the lock—she wished for a moment more to calm the beatings of her heart, but while she yet lingered, the lock turned beneath her hand, and William North stood before her face to face. Involuntarily, Margaret sought to conceal her disfigured countenance in her hands; but she was too late; Mr. North had seen all. With a tenderness such as he had never yet manifested towards her, he drew her arm within his and led her to a sofa—telling her of the anxiety he had felt during her illness, and of his thankfulness and joy in her recovery. Other words he said of still tenderer import, but Margaret scarce understood—scarce dared listen to them; she was saying to herself over and over again, "He has not yet seen me—he will change when he sees me!" So entirely had her feelings entered into the situation she had assumed, that she actually forgot that she was playing a part.

The blessed words she dared not accept as hers were still falling on her ear, and at last she exclaimed in desperation, "Stay—you have not yet looked at me! I am greatly changed. Pray—pray know the worst!"

It is true that hitherto, from a motive of delicacy, William had refrained from looking at Margaret's altered face; but he now turned his eyes full upon her, saying in his cordial, manly way, "Margaret, there is no worst to me, where you are concerned. Changed—altered as you may, you will be to me best—dearest. Do not weep, my love—your face, though it was pleasant to look upon, did not gain my affections; they were won by something better—your noble, generous nature, which is still left you, and of which no misfortune can deprive you. Dear Margaret, tell me that I have not loved in vain."

But Margaret was unable to speak, so violently was she weeping—happy, blissful tears they were; but they compelled her to fly from the apartment to regain her composure. On reaching her own room, however, she lost a moment in flinging from her the disguises which disfigured her. The red disappeared from her nose, the yellow from her teeth, and the patch from her eye in a marvellously short space of time. Her rich, beautiful hair was released from the ugly cap, and folded simply round her elegantly formed head. A white robe replaced the shapeless wrapper; excitement had brought a bright colour to her cheeks; but the tears were yet sparkling in her clear brown eyes, as she re-appeared before her lover.

William North was pacing up and down the room when she entered; she approached him unperceived, and laying her hand on his arm, looked up in his face. He turned and gazed at her in astonishment. Never had she looked so perfectly lovely. Tears and smiles—tenderness and merriment were struggling for mastery in her bright face.

"Forgive me, William," she said, in a low, sweet voice, full of tenderness,—"forgive me a jest—too serious, perhaps—but one I can never regret, since it has revealed to me how manly and generous is the love of a truly noble heart. How glad I am not to be obliged to accept the sacrifice you showed yourself so capable of making, since, at best, I am not unworthy of such love as yours."

As Mr. North's circumstances were such as to justify his immediate marriage, and as there was no reason for his engagement with our heroine being kept a secret, it was soon generally known, and, as is usual, made the topic of much conversation for a day or two. Hamilton Myers, among others, was discussing the subject the morning after the engagement "came out." He was standing with a group of young men at the corner of the street, and had just said, "Well, I wish North joy of his bargain; for I can attest, from ocular demonstration, that the late pretty Miss Nesbitt is at present a perfect fright—a mere wreck. I tremble when I think of the escape I have myself had; for I was nearly caught, I assure you. Never saw anybody so much changed by illness in my life! Why she has lost all her teeth, and her hair, and one eye; her nose was as red as an old toper's, and her skin the colour of a dandelion—she looked like a caricature of one of the witches in Macbeth. 'Pon honour, feel like a man who has but just escaped being caught and eaten by an ogress."

So far had Myers volubly proceeded in his description, when one of his companions touched him—he turned, and saw, close beside him, Miss Nesbitt leaning on her lover's arm, and looking more beautiful than he had ever seen her. Mr. North had delayed her a moment to speak to an old friend of his, whom he recognised in the group; and while doing so, Margaret had time to say to Myers, with a malicious smile, her bright eyes dancing with merriment, "I fear it is too late for you to confide your secret to me, Mr. Myers; but perhaps with my resemblance to witches I am also endowed with enough of their attributes to divine what it might have been, had not fortune rescued you from the hands of the 'ogress.' And henceforth you will know how to beware of witches and ogresses."

Leaving the discomfited and puzzled Mr. Myers (whose brains on this subject have never cleared) to reply as he best can to the indignant queries of his companions as to the meaning of the representations he had been making them, and to solace himself as well as he is able for having lost the hope of obtaining the sweetest and prettiest girl in the city for a wife—we take our leave of him, as well as of our happy heroine, and the lover who so nobly stood the love-test.