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"THE TWO WIVES OF THE KING."

TRANSLATED FOR THE "SATURDAY READER" FROM
THE FRENCH OF PAUL FEVAL.

OUR OLD NEIGHBOURHOOD.

THERE is a fine breezy neighbourhood within half an hour's walk of our centre of civilization, where grass grows and clear water runs; where the fitting swallows find abundant material for building operations; ducks and hens rear their respective families unmolested; and dear little green goslings emerge out of their verdant youth, to arrive, happily, at disagreeable goosehood. The dogs in this locality are well-disposed animals, having been educated up to their duties, and co-operate cheerfully with the small boys, and old women who are the main guardians of these feathered broods. Commerce is not entirely unknown. Green apples, in and out of season, vile candy, sunburnt cakes, pipes, spruce beer of superlative quality, and new-laid eggs are to be obtained at reasonable cost.

Small thickets of blueberry bushes, and wild laurel, graceful clumps of feathery bracken, and a wilderness of sweet fern, border the green winding road, or make room, where the little brooks pleasantly define the side-walks, for many-patterned mosses, and the rare blue violet for which you may often search the woods in vain. Among the bits of woodland the robin, the grey and green linnnet, and their beautiful scarlet relative, are numerous and scarcely shy, despite the occasional incursions of those marauders who profess to be "out shooting." Here and there a bend of the road shows you the salt-water, blue and curling—lapping the shore below with the monotonous music that recalls summer associations in every tone. One thinks of "Calypso's Isle," poor jilted Ariadne's cliff, and other such agreeable watering-places, at present more or less out of fashion. In this out-of-door weather, within hearing of that low rippling plash, one envies the mermaids, and can fancy the weird beauties seated on the great jutting rocks if some lonely silent cove, in the shadow of broad branches stretching out far above them, curling their long bright locks, and meaning the same sort of mischief prevalent among more modern damsels. But the inhabitants of this green descending lane have no respect for Calypso, although the story of

"That lone and lovely island,
In the far-off southern seas,"

may very possibly have been enacted over again among them, and certainly do not emulate the mermaids in their favourite occupation—hair-dressing seeming to be rather a lost art in the vicinity.

Hither in their country rambles, seeking for quiet and fresh air, come the more peaceable

and orderly members of the warlike profession; and you may often obtain a glimpse of a red coat, through the windows of the clean little parlours, (for parlours are not unknown here) that face the road; the martial wearers having cultivated their opportunities, and secured the friendship and good-will of these humble habitations. The houses are thinly scattered, and the population by no means numerous, yet the neighbourhood is not wanting in suggestive bits of character. I think first of a tall, straggling house, planned and erected in a spirit of weak-minded ambition, that causes it to resemble closely the spurious and rather decayed gentility of its owner; never more than half finished, it remains a striking specimen of the exalted views, and feeble results which characterise his general performances. But, in speaking thus disrespectfully of our friend's achievements, I should make an exception in favour of his garden. There are no failures there. "Tilling the ground," as he elegantly expresses it, is his chief pleasure; probably, because it is the thing not expected of him, shoe-making being his professed, but sorely neglected business. Even the potatoe-blight passes over his thrifty rows, and descends upon the humble little patch of some worthier neighbour. The earliest roses, the most double-dahlia, the richest carnations glow and flourish here, with a magnificence that sets rival efforts at defiance. Nor is he a niggard of these treasures, particularly when he finds them useful in appeasing the just wrath of feminine applicants disappointed in the way of business. But this refuge is not always successful, and floral offerings fail to propitiate the more obdurate sex. The fact of his being a truly excellent workman renders these horticultural tastes, in the eyes of such persons, rather an aggravation of their own grievances, than a merit to be appreciated in him; and when some exasperated employer after vainly waiting to be shod, until he is in danger of going barefoot, demands an explanation of the delay, his feelings are not much soothed by an affable description of the prosperity of the garden, accompanied with a statement of the great improvement in the health of the proprietor since he had been engaged therein.

He has a wife, whom he treats with much condescension, when he notices her at all; an anxious toiling woman—without whose commonplace qualities his pretensions would have been at a lower ebb than they are. She and her boys and girls, of whom there are any number, work at home and abroad, striving to live with some degree of comfort and decency—their good sense and industry very often foiled by his unwise projects, and misapplied energies. "Peter," said a lady one day, to one of these urchins, who was creditably trying to earn a penny by errand-going. "Does your father mean ever to finish my boots?" "Yes, ma'am," said Peter, with great readiness, "when he gets his health." Peter inherits the paternal phraseology, and the inquirer felt that her case was hopeless as ever.

The outward man, in this case, as in most others, is a good indication of character. The tall spare jaunty figure, almost invariably attired in an antiquated dress coat, and making a poor attempt at juvenility as it whisks along its familiar tracks, is very expressive, indeed, of the worthless old gentleman. But if his faults are chronic, his politeness is unfailing; and his friends are too well accustomed to his shifts and evasions to be angry with him very long.

Not far off is to be found the carpenter of the district—a solemn, lanky, important personage. He has not penetrated much into the world, but is content with the performance of odd jobs in his own vicinity. Working upon one occasion,

at one of the bettermost houses in the neighbourhood, he disappeared for two or three days, somewhat to the inconvenience of his employers.

Returning with much composure to his unfinished labours, he announced that his wife had died in the interval. Shocked at the news, a kind old lady undertook to condole with him, remarking that he "must be very much grieved at the loss of so good a wife;" upon which the philosophic man replied that he knew "many people made a great fuss about such things, but for his own part, he never gave way to these vulgar feelin's," leaving his consoler rather out of work.

Further on, where the houses are fewer, and the road winds through the wild pasture land, you reach a weather-worn hut, nesting in the shelter of two or three tall fir-trees. Not very promising in externals, this small habitation is scrupulously clean, and even comfortable within. Its mistress is a sable sphinx-like woman, whose manners combine mystery with dignity. She is a person of few words, but she amply atones for that deficiency by the quality of her language. She expresses herself in grandiloquent terms, and has the gift of inventing epithets of the most expressive nature in crises where description would fail more ordinary beings. Priscilla has not been a constant inhabitant of these parts. Years ago she married, and emigrated to Boston, but in a year or two returned to her former abode alone, taking up her old mode of life with equanimity, and cutting short all inquiries respecting her missing husband, with the brief explanation, "that he was an annoyance." Subsequently she made an exploring expedition to the W—— Diggings, and soon became favourably known to society by the excellent performance of her duties as chief cook at the principal inn, or hotel perhaps we should say, of that prosperous region. But Priscilla was, like ourselves, not quite perfect, and the second venture proved not much more successful than her matrimonial exploit. She had one failing which is apt to create confusion, and disaster in the practical department of the art of cookery. She was not at all times a consistent member of the Temperance Society; and upon one occasion, when this weakness was unusually developed, she and her mistress differed so materially, not to say violently, regarding the comforts and necessities of the inner man of their guests, that the Ethiopian woman threw up her position in disgust, and left her superior in undisputed possession of the pots and pans.

Priscilla is accomplished in the act of disclosing future events, to minds suitably prepared to receive such revelations, and is in great repute as a prophetess among the young ladies of the houses in which she is frequently employed. No vulgar 'fortuneteller' is she, selling glimpses of futurity for filthy lucre; but opens the book of fate for particular favorites, upon certain conditions. She insists upon the seclusion of a private chamber, stating that "it is not lawful" for her to be so engaged, she being "A Baptist member." Her perceptions are as keen as her black eyes, and enable her to inform her hearers, with little difficulty, of much that they already know, thereby confirming her reputation for magic, upon testimony as indisputable as that which has established the fame of more celebrated wizards. There are times, however, when she finds herself in circumstances, owing to the mischievous reserve of her inquirers, which baffle even her readiness and skill, but she revenges herself on such occasions by refusing to prophesy further, on the ground that "it is impossible to tell what will happen to young ladies who are so exumptious." Exumptious meaning, it has been conjectured, hard to please. Nevertheless,