





THE HUNGRY YEAR

BY

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THE HUNGRY YEAR:

AUTUMN.

PART I.



THE war was over. Seven red years of blood
Had scourged the land from mountain-top to sea :
(So long it took to rend the mighty frame
Of England's empire in the western world).
Rebellion won at last : and they who loved
The cause that had been lost, and kept their faith
To England's crown, and scorned an alien name.

Passed into exile ; leaving all behind
Except their honour, and the conscious pride
Of duty done to country and to king.
Broad lands, ancestral homes, the gathered wealth
Of patient toil and self-denying years
Were confiscate and lost ; for they had been
The salt and savor of the land ; trained up
In honour, loyalty, and fear of God.
The wine upon the lees, decanted when
They left their native soil, with sword-belts drawn
The tighter ; while the women only, wept
At thought of o'd firesides no longer theirs ;
At household treasures reft, and all the land
Upset, and ruled by rebels to the King.

Not drooping like poor fugitives, they came
In exodus to our Canadian wilds ;
But full of heart and hope, with heads erect
And fearless eyes, victorious in defeat.—
With thousand toils they forced their devious way
Through the great wilderness of silent woods

That gloomed o'er lake and stream ; till higher rose
 The northern star above the broad domain
 Of half a continent, still theirs to hold,
 Defend, and keep forever as their own ;
 Their own and England's, to the end of time.

The virgin forests, carpeted with leaves
 Of many autumns fallen, crisp and sear,
 Put on their woodland state ; while overhead
 Green seas of foliage roared a welcome home
 To the proud exiles, who for empire fought,
 And kept, though losing much, this northern land
 A refuge and defence for all who love
 The broader freedom of a commonwealth,
 Which wears upon its head a kingly crown.

Our great Canadian woods of mighty trees,
 Proud oaks and pines, that grew for centuries—
 King's gifts upon the exiles were bestowed.
 Ten thousand homes were planted ; and each one,
 With axe, and fire, and mutual help, made war
 Against the wilderness, and smote it down.
 Into the opened glades, unlit before,
 Since forests grew or rivers ran, there leaped
 The sun's bright rays, creative heat and light,
 Waking to life the buried seeds that slept
 Since Time's beginning, in the earth's dark womb.

The tender grass sprang up, no man knew how ;
 The daisies' eyes unclosed ; wild strawberries
~~Lay~~ ^{glowed} white as hoar-frost on the slopes—and sweet
 The violets perfumed the evening air ;
 The nodding clover grew up everywhere,—
 The trailing rasp, the trefoil's yellow cup
 Sparkled with dew drops ; while the humming bees
 And birds and butterflies, unseen before,
 Found out the sunny spots and came in throngs.

But earth is man's own shadow, say the wise,
 As wisdom's secrets are two-fold ; and each
 Responds to other, both in good and ill—
 A crescent thought will one day orb to full.
 The ground, uncovered by the woodman's axe,
 Burst into bloom ; but with the tender grass
 And pretty violets, came up the dock,
 The thistle, fennel, mullen, and a crowd
 Of noisome weeds, that with the gentle flowers
 Struggled for mastery, till the ploughman trod
 Them down beneath his feet, and sowed the ground
 With seed of corn for daily use and food.

But long and arduous were their labours ere
 The rugged fields produced enough for all—
 (For thousands came ere hundreds could be fed)
 The scanty harvests, gleaned to their last ear,
 Sufficed not yet. Men hungered for their bread
 Before it grew, yet cheerful bore the hard,
 Coarse fare and russet garb of pioneers ;—
 In the great woods content to build a home
 And commonwealth, where they could live secure
 A life of honour, loyalty, and peace.

The century's last decade set in with signs
 Of coming wrath over the forest land.
 The sun and moon alternate rose and set,
 Red, dry, and fiery, in a rainless sky ;
 And month succeeded month of parching drouth,
 That ushered in the gaunt and hungry year,—
 The hungry year whose name still haunts the land
 With memories of famine and of death !

Corn failed, and fruit and herb. The tender grass
 Fell into dust. Trees died like sentient things,
 And stood wrapped in their shrouds of withered leaves,
 That rustled weirdly round them, sear and dead.
 From springs and brooks, no morning mist arose ;
 The water vanished ; and a hazy sky
 Glowed hot and sullen through the pall of smoke
 That rose from burning forests, far and near.
 The starving cattle died, looking at man
 With dumb reproach, as if the blame were his,—
 Perhaps it was ; but man looked up to heaven
 In stern-lipped silence, or in earnest prayer
 Besought relief of God, or, in despair,
 Invoked the fiercest storms from tropic seas
 To quench the earth with rain, and loose the claws
 And teeth of famine from the scorching land.

Slowly the months rolled round on fiery wheels ;
 The savage year relented not, nor shut
 Its glazing eye, till all things perished,—food
 For present, seed for future use were gone.
 " All swallowed up," the starving Indian said,
 " By the great serpent of the Chenonda
 That underlies the ground and sucks it dry."

While equally perplexed at such distress,
 Despite his better knowledge,—“ Why is this ? ”
 The white man asked and pondered ; but in vain.
 There came no quick response. Nature is deaf

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And voiceless both, to satisfy the heart
That needs a deeper answer than she gives.
And till we seek for light of God alone,
Putting ourself aside and all we know,—
Learning the truth in His way, not our own.
The mystery of mysteries remains.
Sin, sorrow, death: inexplicable! were
These not beyond the veil a power of love;
God in the human, infinitely like.
Who bore our pains himself, as if to show
He cannot, without suffering, pluck away
The rooted sin that tangles in the heart,
Like tares with wheat. Permissive love, that lets
Them grow together for a troubled space,
Till ripe for harvest. Love triumphant, when
The Reaper comes, and life is winnowed clean
Of its base weeds, and all that's good and true
In human souls is garnered up by Him,
Till His vast purposes are all fulfilled.

PART II.

Upon the banks of seign Checondia,*
With sycamores and giant elm trees fringed,
Backed by unbroken forests, far from hail
Of friends' and neighbours' help in time of need,
A house of massive logs, with open porch
Overrun with vines and creepers, fronted full
Upon the quiet stream, that, sleeping, lay
Hot in the noontide sun. A well, with sweep
Long as the yard of a felucca, stood
Unused and dry: its glaring stones aglow.
Some fields of tillage, rough with undrawn roots
And stumps of trees, extended to the woods
That, like a wall, surrounded every side.
Hovel for cattle that were nowhere seen,
Stood empty near the house; nor corn, nor grass,
Nor food for man or beast was visible—
The famine for a year had scourged the land:

Upon the river-bank a dark canoe
Just touched the shore with its recurring prow.
A woman's shawl and rustic basket lay
Beneath the paddle, thrown in haste aside
By one who came across the Checondia

* The Chippewa.

With food and tidings for the dying man
 Who lay within the porch, unconscious all
 Of help, or her who brought it. A tall man :
 Not young indeed, sun-browned and scarred with wounds,
 Received in battle fighting for his King.
 His features, worn and haggard, were refined
 By intellect and noble purposes
 Which beautify the looks as naught else can,
 And give the impress of a gentleman.
 A face it was of truth and courage, one
 To trust your life to in your hour of need :
 But twitching now in pain, with eyes that looked
 Enlarged by hunger, as of one who sought
 For bread he could not find : and so gave up
 To plead with God for life, and waited death.

He lay, and in his eyes a far-off gaze
 Saw things invisible to other's ken.
 Delirious words dropped from his fevered lips
 As in a dream of bygone happiness,
 That went and came like ripples on a pool,
 Where eddying winds blow fitful to and fro—
 A hunger feast of fantasy and love
 That haunts the starving with illusive joys.
 And one dear name repeated as in prayer,
 Clung to his lips and would not leave them : nay,
 Unspoken, one might see it syllabled
 In sign and proof of his undying love.

Beside his couch, in passionate despair,
 A woman knelt, clasping his hands in hers,
 With kisses and endearing words, who bade
 Him rouse to hope of life, for she had brought
 The food for lack of which he dying lay.
 Tall, lithe, and blooming ere the hungry year
 Had wasted her to shadow of herself,
 She still was beautiful. A lady born
 And nurtured in the old colonial days :
 Of graceful mien, gentle in word and deed,
 As well became a daughter of the time
 When honour was no byword, and the men
 Were outdone by the women of their kin—
 Who spurned the name of rebel as a stain :
 And kissed their sons and sent them to the war
 To serve the King with honour, or to die.

Her long black hair, shook loose upon her neck,
 Was turning grey with sorrow at the pang
 Of those she loved and could not help. Her eyes

Were full of pity infinite and tears ;
 With courage in them to encounter aught :
 Toil, pain, or death, for sake of one she loved.

Amid the rage of famine and of fire,
 That spread a consternation through the land,
 It had been rumoured : Food was on the way
 As fast as oar and sail could speed it on !
 " From far Quebec to Frontenac," they said,
 " King's ships and forts gave up the half their stores :
 Batteaux were coming laden ; while the Prince
 Himself accompanied, to cheer them on :

The news flew swiftly—was itself a feast,
 Gave strength and courage to the famished land.
 Fresh tidings followed. One day guns were fired
 And flags displayed all over Newark town.
 The people went in crowds to see the Prince—
 Their royal Edward, who had come in haste
 To succour and console in their distress
 The loyal subjects of his sire, the King.

The loving wife upon the Chenonda
 Had heard the welcome news—in time, she hoped,
 To save her husband, overwrought with toil
 In fighting fire among the burning woods,
 And prostrated with hunger, till he lay
 Helpless and hopeless, drawing nigh to death.
 With woman's energy, that's born of love,
 Overpowering all her weakness, she resolved
 To save her husband's life or for him die.
 With tearful kisses and with fond adieux
 And many prayers, she left him in the charge
 Of one old faithful servant, born a slave,
 And now a freedman in his master's house,
 And traced with desperate steps the trackless woods
 And smoking morasses, that lay between
 Her forest home and Newark's distant town,
 To buy, not beg, the bread for which they starved.

She reached the town ; befriended everywhere—
 For each one knew all others in those days
 Of frank companionship and mutual aid—
 She saw the Prince, the flower of courtesy,
 Who listened to her tale, which, ere half told,
 Prompt order went to grant beyond her prayer.
 And bread and wine, and all things needed else,
 By messengers were sent to Chenonda.
 A royal gift, bestowed with royal grace,

With words of kindest sympathy and cheer,
Which of all gifts are those men hold most dear.

The Prince knew well, of no one but the King,
Or in his name, would these proud loyalists
Receive a gift. "But this," he earnest said,
"Was not a gift, but royal debt and due
The King owed every man who had been true
To his allegiance; and owed most to those
Who fought to keep unbroken all the orb
Of England's empire, rounded like the world."

With fit and grateful words she thanked the prince,
And took his gift and royal message, full
Of gentlest sympathy for their distress,—
Nor rested longer than the first pale streak
Of morn upon th' horizon rose, ere she
Set out for home, with treasure more than gold:
Bread and the Prince's message, and returned
The way she came, outstripping, in her haste,
The messengers who followed in her track.
She reached at noon her home on Chenonda,
Too late, alas! for one had outstripped her!
Death, like a phantom, had run on before
And entered first, and smit down whom he would!

Their faithful servant lay upon the ground,
Dead in his master's service: worn and spent
With hunger, watching, sickness, and a care,
Not for himself, but those he loved and served,—
A faithful man and loyal to the last.
And yet a sadder sight did meet her when,
Upon the couch, she saw her husband lie,
All fever flushed and dying, gazing wild
With open eyes that saw her not; and mind
That wandered crazily o'er thousand themes;
And her, the theme of themes, unrecognized!
She threw herself upon her knees, nor felt
The stones that bruised her as she shrieked, and gazed
With startled eyes, and wildly called his name;
Who, deaf to her appeals, talked heedless on,
In his delirium, with words that pierced
The inmost memories of her woman's heart.

"O Minne! Minne mine! Where are you, love?
Come to me, you or none!" he dreaming said,
Unconscious of her presence, or the hand
That smoothed his hair, or lips that kissed his brow.
"O, Minne mine! what hinders us to-day

To climb the mountain-summit through the broad
Autumnal forest, dropping leaves of gold
And scarlet on our heads as we go on ?”

His fevered thoughts strayed back to autumn days
When he had wooed his lovely bride ; the flower
Of Shenandoah—all gentleness and grace,
When, blushing with the consciousness of love,
She gave her willing hand and pledged her troth
One day beneath the spreading maple trees ;
Whose leaves were flushed with crimson, like her cheek,
And life, that day for them, seemed first begun !

“ O, Minne mine ! my beautiful and true !”
She listened to the unforgotten words,
While grief and terror mingled with the joy
That used to greet their memory in her heart.
“ Loving and loved, each one in other blest,
To-morrow is our happy wedding-day !
The orioles and blackbirds gaily sing,
Mad with delight, upon the golden boughs,
Their song of songs. To-morrow is the day !
To-morrow ! O, my love ! I hear a chime
Of silver bells in heaven, ringing clear ;
To-morrow is their happy wedding-day !”

His words shot straight as arrows, through and through ;
The sweetest recollection of the past
That nestled in her heart and, fed with love,
Lived there engaged, her bosom's bird ; now rent,
Displumed and bleeding, 'neath the shaft of death
Her tears fell hot and thick, and oft she kissed
The pallid cheek and pressed the hand upled
Her to the mountain-top, and held her there
In dalliance sweet and fond affection's thrall ;
While the broad world beneath them opened wide
Its fairest treasures to their raptured eyes.

Soft Indian summer floated in the air,
Like smoke of incense, o'er the dreamy woods ;
So still, one only heard the dropping leaves
Of forests turned to crimson, brown, and gold,
In myriad tints, to craze a painter's eye.
For Nature's alchemy, transmuting all,
Gilded the earth with glamour, rich and rare,
As if to give the eye, weary of this,
A transient glimpse of fairer worlds to be.

She wept and listened as he still spake on :
“ Thank God for autumn days ! O, Minne mine !

In autumn we were wed, in autumn came
 Our love's fruition, when our babe was born.
 In autumn, when the laden orchard trees
 Dropped ripest apples, russet, red, and green ;
 And golden peaches lingered past their time :
 And richest flowers of brown October bloomed :
 The gentian blue, crysanthema of snow,
 And purple dahlias ; flowers that bloomed again
 A year away, with amaranths, to strew
 The grave of our young hope—the first and last—
 Who died enfolded in thy tender arms."

She listened, with a look of wan despair,
 As he recalled their early bliss. We drink
 With bitterness the tale of former joys
 Retold in misery. Yet, drink we still,
 Kissing the chalice which we know will kill !
 She watched, consoled, repeated oft his name,
 In hope of recognition ; but in vain.
 No wandering syllable escaped his lips,
 Though faint as dying breath ; but she divined
 Its full intent, and with a woman's ken,
 Saw that his love was perfect, to the core
 Of inmost dreams. The thought with human touch
 Let loose the tears surcharged her swollen heart.
 She wept and listened as he still spake on :

"O, Minne mine ! in autumn, too, we lost
 Our smooth-faced handsome boy ; our Raleigh brave, —
 A stripling full of courage, and athirst
 For honour in the service of the King.
 He died in front of battle, by my side,
 In that hot day we won at Germantown.
 I bore him in my arms from 'midst the dead
 And buried him beneath the autumn leaves,
 In the still forest, by a boulder stone.
 I took thee once to see it—all alone,
 We two as one ; and there we wept as none
 But fathers, mothers weep o'er children gone."

Her heart was torn at mention of her boy,
 So good, so dutiful, so early lost.
 And for a moment a fair picture flashed
 Up from the gulf of buried years. She saw
 Him with his baby feet, as sea pearls pure,
 Essay, with awkward prettiness, to climb
 Up to her knee and bosom to receive
 A storm of kisses each time for reward.

He ceased to speak and breathed with fainter breath,
 Like one forspent, and losing hold of life ;
 His hand grasped tightly hers, as if it were
 His last sheet-anchor in the sands, that failed
 To hold his bark amid the storm of death.

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 PART III.

The hunger fever left him ; and he lay
 Awake, resigned and calm, to meet the end
 He knew was nigh, but feared not, save for her
 Whose yearning eyes bent over him with love
 And pity infinite. His noble face
 Had brightened with a gleam of holy light,
 That sometimes shines in death, to cheer the gloom
 Of that dark valley of the shadow, when
 Our hour is come ; when from the couch of pain
 We must descend and go, each one alone, —
 Alone—to travel on a darksome road
 We know not ; but, when found, a king's highway !
 Broad and well beaten ! None may err therein !
 Made for all men to travel ; and not hard
 For those unburthened and who humbly take
 The staff God offers all, to ease the way
 And lead us wondering to the vast beyond.

The " Help of God " is Death's strong angel called,
 Who brings deliverance from this world of care ;
 Azrael, who casts his sombre mantle off
 Upon the threshold, and in robes of white,
 With loving smiles, will lead us on and on,
 Out of the darksome valley to the hills,
 Where shines eternal day for evermore !

He lay and looked at her, remembering
 The things had happened until all was clear.
 " O, Minnie mine ! " he murmured, " I have been
 Unconscious of thy presence and return !
 The fever overmastered me, and grief,
 When our old servant died, with none to aid ;
 And I fell on my couch and knew no more.
 But some one said to-day, or did I dream ?
 The woods are all ablaze and roofed with fire
 Up Chenonda, and down the deep ravine,
 The marshes, dried like tinder, catch the flames ;
 The very earth is burning at the roots,
 While savage beasts tumultuous, rush and roar

In rage and terror from their burning lairs !
How could I risk thee, love, to go alone
Amid such dangers as would daunt a man ?
To seek for help in Newark's distant town,
Where haply help is not—or needed more
Than in our forests Everywhere, they say,
The iron grip of famine holds the land ;
And men have long since shared their household corn
To the last handful, and there's nothing left !

She stooped and kissed him tenderly, with lips
That trembled in an ecstasy of fear,
What might betoken all the signs she saw,—
Then told in broken accents how she sped :
“ I care not though my feet were bruised or scorched
Treading the burning forests, if I brought
Good news, my love, to thee, and help to all
The famished dwellers on the Chenonda ! ”

Then she recounted in his eager ear,
That drank her words as summer dust the rain,
How England's Prince had come ! and Newark town
Was hung with flags ; and cannon pealed salutes
To welcome him from old Niagara's walls !
And she had seen the river margin thronged
With broad batteaux, all laden down with corn,
Brought by the Prince in haste, to help and save
The King's true subjects in the forest land.

A gleam of joy across his features shone,
As when a sudden ray escapes the sun,
Shot through a cloud rift in the wintry sky,
Athwart the old gray Mississaugua tower ;
Where it stands desolate, on guard no more
Over Ontario's ever-changing sea.

“ God bless the Prince ! ” he said, “ 'Tis princely done
To bring, not send the help we sorely need !
A gift is sweetest from the giver's hand
When face to face we look and understand
The soul of kindness in it to the full.
And one may take King's gifts and feel no shame,”
He said, to reconcile his manly pride
To take a gift as alms from even him.
“ For he is ours and we in fealty his.
We hold this land of England and the King
Though all the seven plagues around us cling ! ”
Then added, in a tone of fervent prayer :
“ Bless we Prince Edward's name for evermore ! ”

She told him of his royal courtesy,
 And tender words of sympathy for him
 And all the loyal people, doubly scourged
 By fire and famine in their forest homes.
 She told him of the messengers by her
 Outrun, but following in haste with food
 To aid the dwellers on the Chenonda,—
 While she had brought a basket in her hand
 For present need, until the men arrived
 With waggon train and plenty for them all !

“Thanks for God’s mercies !” said he. “Thank the Prince
 And thee, my love, for all that thou hast done !
 I now can die content. The country’s saved !
 Content to die—except in leaving thee.”

He turned upon his couch and looked at her,
 As if his heart were bursting with the thought.
 “O, Minne mine !” he whispered, “bend thy ear
 As thou didst in those happy autumn days
 When I first claimed thy hand and all thy love.
 As thou wert to me then, so be thou now !
 For now a greater sorrow waits us both
 Than then, if possible, our mutual joy.
 Together we have lived our life of love
 In perfect oneness. Now apart ; one dead
 One living, shall we love alway as now ?
 I hear thee whisper yes, O Minne mine !
 Then be it so ; for there is nought to fear ;
 Though fall between us the mysterious veil
 Which hides from mortal eyes the life beyond,—
 The veil that is not lifted till we die.”

Between those two that veil did never fall !
 She heard, but only in her inward ear,
 His dying whispers, as she speechless lay
 Kneeling beside his couch ; nor marked that day
 Had faded in the west and Night had come,
 Bearing upon her shoulder, draped with cloud,
 The harvest moon, that made the very sky
 About it black, so silver clear it shone.
 The south wind rose. The smoke which filled the air
 Far down upon th’ horizon rolled away ;
 While shorn of radiance in the moonlight clear,
 The stars looked blankly in the porch and saw,
 With eyes as pitiless as stony fate,
 A sight had melted human eyes to tears.
 The rustling sedges on the river-side

Alone made moan about the couch of pain,
 Now still forever,—all was silent else,—
 True man and loving woman—both were dead :

The Prince's messengers came quickly ; but
 Too late to save, and found them as they died,
 With hand and cheek together,—one in death,
 As their fair love had been but one in life,
 The last sad victims of the Hungry Year.

Where sluggish Chenonda comes stealing round
 The broken point, whose other side is lashed
 By wild Niagara rushing madly by,
 Afoam with rapids, to his leap below.
 An ancient graveyard overlooks the place
 Of thunderous mists, which throb and rise and fall
 In tones and undertones, from out the depths,
 That never cease their wild, unearthly song.
 Among the oldest stones, moss-grown and gray,
 A rough-hewn block, half-sunken, weather-worn,
 Illegible, forgotten, may be found
 By one who loves the memory of the dead
 Who, living, were the founders of the land.
 It marks the spot where lies the mingled dust
 Of two who perished in the Hungry Year.
 Few seek the spot. The world goes rushing by
 The ancient landmarks of a nobler time,—
 When men bore deep the imprint of the law
 Of duty, truth, and loyalty unstained.
 Amid the quaking of a continent,
 Torn by the passions of an evil time,
 They counted neither cost nor danger, spurned
 Defections, treasons, spoils ; but feared God,
 Nor shamed of their allegiance to the King.
 To keep the empire one in unity
 And brotherhood of its imperial race,—
 For that they nobly fought and bravely lost,
 Where losing was to win a higher fame !
 In building up our northern land to be
 A vast dominion stretched from sea to sea,—
 A land of labour, but of sure reward,—
 A land of corn to feed the world withal,—
 A land of life's rich treasures, plenty, peace ;
 Content and freedom, both to speak and do,
 A land of men to rule with sober law
 This part of Britain's empire, next the heart
 Loyal as were their fathers and as free !

NIAGARA, Ontario,
 October, 1878.