

AMONG THE FRUIT DISTRICTS OF KENT.



STRAWBERRY-PACKING.



SPRING-TIDE comes with glory to the Kentish villages, for the cherry, plum, and apple orchards, when in blossom, are lovely beyond description. The delicate scent of the plum-flower, as one walks through perhaps thirty acres of it, the exquisite bloom on the apple-trees, together with the quaint shapes of the twisted and gnarled old plum, apple, and cherry trunks, make the country one scene of delight. Stand in the midst of a ten-acre cherry orchard! To look up at the overhanging and interlaced boughs is like gazing at a snowstorm arrested in its fall, and besides the pleasure of seeing this actual beauty, there is that of thinking what a promise of prosperity and comfort it holds out for the year, as, to large and small growers alike, one really good season will pay for three bad ones, if "hard, stone, and small" fruit have alike been successful. Fruit and vegetable growing has now become quite an important industry, owing to the increased demand for the produce of the market-gardens and fruit-farms, and may be considered as a prosperous trade, notwithstanding the way in which the fairest promise of the spring is often marred by an unseasonable frost, a gale, too much wet, too much dry weather, or a plague of insects.

In the summer of 1883 the crop of small fruit was far above the average, but the plums and apples were failures. Last year the same fortune prevailed, except that the apple crop was not in all places so completely a bad one.

The children in the neighbourhood of fruit-farms are specially healthy; the doctor tells us it is because they eat such quantities of ripe fruit. They go in the fields to pick, and as they are allowed to eat without stint, they choose the best, and it seems to do them nothing but good. The growers find it the least wasteful plan to allow them this liberty, on the same principle that a confectioner permits a raid amongst the tarts to new boys; they soon get tired of them, and if the children were forbidden to eat during the picking, it would entail constant supervision, as they would be tempted to steal and hide the fruit. One of the most striking sights to strangers in these districts is the fruit as it hangs unprotected by the pathways and growing in open fields with public roads across them. The farmers say they never suffer from the depredations of the natives, but that on Bank Holidays they are obliged to set watchers, as the country is overrun by strangers who do not abide by the unwritten law of the land.

In parts of Kent hundreds of acres are devoted to strawberries, which are sometimes grown under fruit-

trees, but for the most part are planted in the open in rows, about two and a half feet apart and one and a half feet from plant to plant. The plough is run between the rows in autumn to keep the plants on ridges, and assist in the drainage of the roots. In spring the ground is levelled, and a straw litter laid between the plants, in order to prevent the fruit from being splashed by the rains. When ripe, that required for dessert purposes is picked with stalks and gathered into small baskets, which are emptied into sieves holding about twelve pounds, and for each of these a picker gets threepence. The packing is a task requiring considerable neatness and skill, and the practised hands sit in rough sheds built in the fruit-gardens, all the summer days, arranging the ripe strawberries with their leaves in the punnets: these again are packed in boxes containing sometimes thirty and sometimes sixty baskets, and are sent off in carts or by train to the market. The bruised, or over-ripe fruit, termed "squashers," are packed in casks, and disposed of at some of the jam factories.

An idea of the amount of fruit grown may be gained from the fact that from six to eight tons of strawberries have been sent in a day from one farm alone, and from 100 to 125 tons forwarded by one grower to market during a single season. The value of the crop varies from £20 to £60 per acre for best fruit, and for "squashers" and jam fruit, from £15 to £20 per ton.

After gathering, the runners are cut away and, with refuse, taken to the centre of the alleys, which are then dug and planted with lettuces.

A plantation lasts good five years, and is not in good bearing order until the second year. The cost of the runners is about 5s. per 1,000, and about 7,000 plants per acre are required.

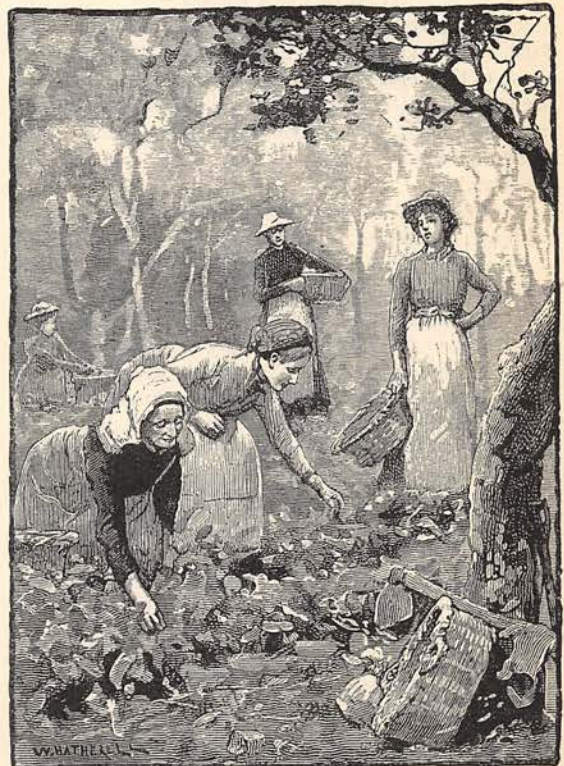
Bush fruit is grown in orchards, and under the shade of the trees; the cost of planting an orchard with trees and bushes is about £20 per acre, and it is about three years before the berries give sufficient crop to make a return.

Three hundred hands are often employed at a time on a large farm, and the earnings of the industrious are considerable: good hands can make as much as 11s. a day at gooseberry-picking, though the average sum is only 6s. Gathering commences as soon as the berries are at all suitable, and the bushes are stripped at one picking, from ten to thirty acres being cleared in a week, according to the requirements of the market; and as a week, even in favourable weather, only consists of four and a half days (from Monday morning to Friday at two o'clock), the amount of work done is immense; and hands are required to be in the field from three o'clock in the morning till dark, and even have occasionally been expected to pick by lantern-light.

Vegetables are grown on the same extensive scale, and are also remunerative; in some cases fields of cauliflowers spread over many acres of ground, and from them are despatched, for days in succession, two or three fully-laden vans, each containing three tons of the vegetable. The

great cart stands outside the field, and while two men are busily employed in cutting from the ground, one picks off the superfluous leaves, another takes the cauliflowers and throws them up to a man standing on the van, who, catching them rapidly, deftly hands them to a comrade skilled in properly placing them, and a compact green mass soon grows up, and the cart slowly jogs away, to be replaced by another, until the market requirements are complete. Cauliflowers have an advantage, as a crop, over savoys, cabbages, or broccoli, in that it is hardly possible to over-stock the market with them: the pickle merchants are always ready to buy up any quantity in summer; and in May, before peas and beans can be had at reasonable prices, good cauliflowers realise excellent profits.

Other vegetables, such as asparagus, peas, and beans, are also grown in large fields, and afford steady work for "field women," as they are called. In fact, all the year round, a well-arranged farm will give employment to many families, only the great fruit-growers requiring aid from the army of "pickers," who are on occasions turned into the fields, and who camp out gipsy-fashion in some corner of the land. These are considered somewhat as interlopers by the regular employés, and unfortunately are not usually regarded as pleasant additions to the rural population, being more tiresome and, if possible, often more dirty than "hoppers," who, by right of constant service, have won



STRAWBERRY-PICKING.

their way to toleration. It remains with the "fruiters" to win their way by decent conduct to a like welcome.

Now that land seems to be had at a tolerably cheap rate, it would appear that fruit-farming and vegetable culture might be increased with profit; and one or two enterprising gentlemen have, we believe, set the example of growing fruit and making jam on their

own land, and already find the industry a satisfactory one. If the strawberry is not to be allowed to take the place of wheat, oats, and barley, a trial of it and of bush fruit might at least be made in many places where the cereals do not pay, and a new and profitable use for his acreage may be opened to the landowner.

M. R. L.

THE EMPEROR'S PARDON.

BY J. BERWICK HARWOOD, AUTHOR OF "LADY FLAVIA," "WITHIN THE CLASP," ETC.



YOU will not give up these people, then, Ivan dearest—you will not give them up, them and their wild, reckless schemes—not even for your Marianne's sake—not even for me?"

With a beating heart I waited for the reply that my Russian lover was slow to give. He stood frowning and looking at the ground, and seemed irresolute. But when he did speak, it was with sufficient firmness that he made answer—

"No, Marianne, no! Never, even for your dear sake, can I separate my hopes and my efforts from those of the comrades who, at all costs to themselves, are striving to liberate Russia from a thralldom such as your happier, luckier England never knew. I am pledged, for weal or woe, to cast in my lot with my brethren."

"I have had my answer—it is enough!" I said, sobbing; and without another word I left him.

A very brief space will suffice to explain our mutual position. I, Marianne Esmonde—an orphan, whose parents had died in India, and who had no near relative surviving except my young brother, Paul, who lived with me in the big Kensington house, standing in its own grounds, as in my grandmother's time, amid tall trees and lawns and flowers—was rich, and, I believe, admired. Old Lady Leslie, our grandmother, had left me all her wealth; and there were those who wondered that Marianne Esmonde was yet unmarried. I was betrothed, however. Several months since I had plighted my promise to a young Russian noble, whom I had met first in Rome, and later in London; and it was with sorrow and dismay that I had learned, partly through the talk of others, but chiefly from his own lips, that Count Ivan Carlovitch, whose father had been a favourite courtier of the late Czar, was leagued with the dangerous faction of the Nihilists, and had embraced their frantic doctrines with the fervour of a convert. In vain had I reasoned, pleaded, and implored. My influence was not strong enough,

sincere as was Ivan's love for me, to counteract the effect of evil counsels, and every day it seemed as if the conspirators with whom he was now leagued were drawing him more hopelessly into the net of their gigantic plot. I must give him up; I felt that the voice of my conscience must be obeyed; but he was so dear to me, with his winning ways and his bright, sweet nature, that his loss meant misery to myself.

I can remember well how I stood alone in my own room, when my last appeal had failed, holding between my fingers the heavy medallion set with brilliants, which enclosed Ivan's portrait, and which was fastened to my neck by a golden chain of Venetian workmanship. I could scarcely bear to divest myself of this—his gift; and yet, how could I, a loyal English girl, whose ancestors had fought and bled at Marston and Worcester, marry one who consorted with men whose hourly study was how best to compass the cold-blooded murder of their sovereign? Bad as the system of Russian rule might be, I had sense enough to see that it would never be remedied by such means as dynamite and daggers. And yet I hesitated as to whether inclination should not prevail over duty, and I, as the wife of a desperate man, link my fortunes with those of Ivan—be they what they might. Duty triumphed. I tore the gold chain from my neck, and flung the medallion, with Ivan's likeness, among the blazing coals of the fire that was burning in the grate, and then throwing myself on my bed, sobbed passionately for hours, as it seemed to me, until my weeping ended in worn-out silence and sadness.

I refused to see Ivan again, and wrote but a few cold lines in reply to his letters. Even when Paul, my brother, came on his behalf to urge me to grant him an interview, I would not yield, and seemed, I have no doubt, hard and stern. The fact was that I dared not trust myself and my good resolutions again in the presence of my discarded lover, lest the tables should be turned again. Then Ivan, after some wretched weeks of waiting, left England for his native country, and a month or two later—I learned it at a reception at the Austrian Embassy, where, of course, foreign diplomatic guests were numerous—Count Ivan Carlovitch had been arrested in Moscow, tried by court-martial, and sentenced as a Nihilist conspirator to Siberia for life. And then it was that for the first time I seemed to realise how I loved him—my poor, misguided boy—