



By GRANT ALLEN.

**M**ORE than once in these papers I have mentioned, as I passed, the wind-swept and weather-beaten Scotch fir on which the night-jar perches, and which forms such a conspicuous object in the wide moorland view from our drawing-room windows. I love that Scotch fir, for its very irregularity and rude wildness of growth; a Carlyle among trees, it seems to me to breathe forth the essential spirit of these bold free uplands. Not that anyone would call it beautiful who has framed his ideas of beauty on the neatness and trimness of park-like English scenery; it has nothing in common with the well-grown and low-feathering Douglas pines which the nursery gardener plants out as "specimen trees" on the smooth velvety sward of some lawn in the lowlands. No, no; my Scotch fir is gnarled and broken-boughed, a great gaunt soldier, scarred from many an encounter with fierce wintry winds, and holding its own even now, every January that passes, by dint of hard struggling against enormous odds with obstinate endurance. Life, for it, is a battle. And I love it for its scars, its toughness, its audacity. It has chosen for its post the highest summit of the ridge, where north-east and south-west alternately assault it; and it meets their assaults with undiminished courage, begotten of long familiarity with fire and flood, with lightning and tempest.

Has it never occurred to you how such a tree must grow? what attacks it must endure, what assaults of the evil one it must continually fight against? Its whole long life is one endless tale of manful struggle and dear-bought victory. What survives of it now in its prime—for it is still a young tree, as trees go on our upland—is at best but a maimed and

mutilated relic. From its babyhood upward it has suffered, like man, an eternal martyrdom. It began life as a winged seed, blown about by the boisterous wind which shook it rudely adrift from the sheltering cone of its mountain-cradled mother. Many a sister seed floated lightly with the breeze to warm nooks in the valley, where the tree that sprang from it now grows tall and straight and equally developed on every side into a noble Scotch fir of symmetrical dimensions. But adventures are to the adventurous; you and I, my tree, know it. You were caught in its fierce hands by some mighty sou'wester that whirled you violently over the hilltop till you reached the very summit of the long straight spur; and there, where it dropped you, you fell and rooted in a wind-swept home on a wind-swept upland. Your growth was slow. For many and many a season your green sprouting top was browsed down by wandering cattle or gnawing rabbits; you had some thirty rings of annual growth, I take it, in your stunted rootstock, just below the level of the soil, before you could push yourself up three inches towards the free and open air of heaven. Year after year, as you strove to rise, those ever-present assailants cropped you close and stunted you; yet still you persevered, and nathless so endured, till, in one lucky season, you made just enough growth, under the sun's warm rays, to overtop and outwit their continual aggression. Then, for a while, you grew apace; you put forth lush green buds, and you looked like a sturdy young tree indeed, with branches sprouting from each side, when, with infinite pains, you had reached to the height of a man's shoulder.

But your course was still chequered. Life is hard on the hilltops. You had to stand stress and strain of wind and weather. Like every other tree on our open moor,



THE GREAT STORM OF LAST AUTUMN RENT ONE HUGE BRANCH IN TWAIN, AND  
TORE OFF A DOZEN LESSER ARMS FROM YOUR BLEEDING TRUNK.



I notice you are savagely blown from the south-west; for the south-west wind here is by far our most violent and dangerous enemy, blowing great gusts at times up the narrow funnel-shaped valleys, and so much more to be dreaded than the bitter north-east, which is elsewhere so inhospitable. "Blown from the south-west," we say as a matter of course in our bald human language; and so indeed it seems. I suppose most casual spectators who look upon you now really believe it is the direct blowing of the wind that so distorts and twists you. You and I know better. We know that each spring, as the sap rises in your veins, you put forth afresh lush green sprouts symmetrically from the buds at your growing-points; and that if these sprouts were permitted to develop equally and evenly in every direction, you would have grown from the first as normally and formally as a spruce-fir or a puzzle-monkey. But not for us are such joys. We must grow as the tempests and the hail-storms permit us. Soon after you have begun each year to put forth your tender green shoots comes a frost—a nipping frost—whirled along on the wide wings of some angry sou'wester. We, your human neighbours, lie abed in our snug cottage, and tremble at the groaning and shivering of our beams, and silently wonder in the dark amid the noise how much of our red-tiled roof will remain over us by morning. (Five pounds' worth of tiles went off, I recollect, in last Thursday week's tempest.) But you on your open hilltop feel the fierce cold wind blow through and through you; till all the buds on your south-western face are chilled and killed; while even the others, more sheltered on the leeward side, have got nipped and checked, so that they develop irregularly. It is this lawless checking of growth in your budding and sprouting stage that really "blows you on one side," as we roughly state it. Only on your sheltered half do you ever properly realise the ground-plan of your nature. Your growth is the resultant of the incident energies. And that, after all, is the case with most of us. Especially with the stormy petrels of our human menagerie.

Yet even to you, too, have come the consolations of love. "Not we alone," says the poet, "have yearnings hymeneal." Late developed on your cold spur, checked and gnarled as you grew, there came to you yet a day when your branches burgeoned forth into tender pink cones, with dainty soft ovules, all athirst for pollen; while on your budding shoots grew thick rings of rich stamens, that flung their golden powder adrift on the air with a lavish profusion right strange in so slenderly endowed an economy. But it is always so in nature. These gnarled hard lives, as people think them, are gilded brightest by the glow and fire of love; these poorest of earth's children are made richest at last in the holiest and best of her manifold blessings. It was nothing to you, I know, my tree, that the fire which swept over the heath some five years since charred all your lower branches and killed half your live bark; you had courage to resist and heart to prevail; and though those poor burnt boughs are dead and gone for all time, you still put forth smiling bundles of green needles above quite as bravely as ever. It was nothing to you that the great storm of last autumn rent one huge branch in twain, and tore off a dozen lesser arms from your bleeding trunk in a wild outburst of fury. The night-jar now sits and croons to you every evening in the after-glow from those self-same stumps; and struggling sheaths of young buds push through on the blown boughs that just escaped with their lives the fury of the tempest. No wonder the Eastern fancy sees curled dragons in the storms that so rend and assail us; but we like them, you and I, for the sake of the breadth, the height, the air, the space, the freedom. What matters it to us though fire rage and wind blow, so long as they leave us our love in peace, and permit us to spread our sheltering shade over our strong young saplings? The hilltops are free, the hilltops are open, from their peaks we can catch betimes some crimson glimpses of the sunrise and the morning.

So now, my Scotch fir, gnarled and broken on the ridge, you know how I love you, and why I sympathise with you.