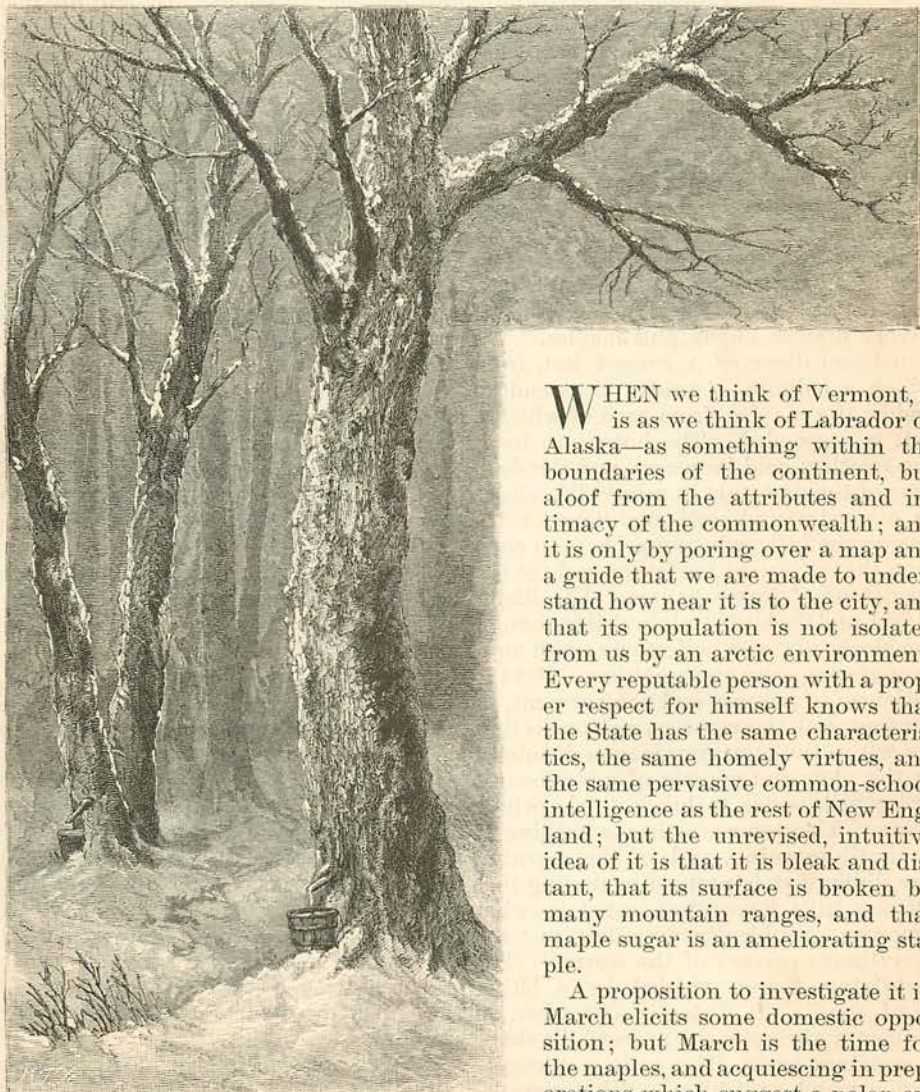


HARPER'S NEW MONTHLY MAGAZINE.

No. CCCLXXI.—APRIL, 1881.—VOL. LXII.

THE GREEN MOUNTAINS IN SUGAR-TIME.



TAPPING.

WHEN we think of Vermont, it is as we think of Labrador or Alaska—as something within the boundaries of the continent, but aloof from the attributes and intimacy of the commonwealth; and it is only by poring over a map and a guide that we are made to understand how near it is to the city, and that its population is not isolated from us by an arctic environment. Every reputable person with a proper respect for himself knows that the State has the same characteristics, the same homely virtues, and the same pervasive common-school intelligence as the rest of New England; but the unrevised, intuitive idea of it is that it is bleak and distant, that its surface is broken by many mountain ranges, and that maple sugar is an ameliorating staple.

A proposition to investigate it in March elicits some domestic opposition; but March is the time for the maples, and acquiescing in preparations which suggest a polar expedition, we leave the city in the

warm and idealizing haze of a premature spring.

All the forenoon we reach northward by the banks of the Hudson, which are clear of snow even up to the heights of Cro'nest and the Storm King; the slopes are brown with the budding foliage, and the water traffic shows that the river men have finally dismissed the winter. But in the afternoon the scene changes; we have passed Troy, and still bearing northward, we look out of the car windows on a landscape with a communicative chilliness of color and feeling. The skies are overcast by heavy clouds, and the air has a moist penetrativeness; the *dépôts* are small and uncomfortable; the soil is scrubby and fallow; the homesteads are seriously unbeautiful; and we detect a dialect in the murmured conversation of the car which convinces us that we are in Vermont.

We come nearer to the hills that at first are distant, and wind through narrow valleys, where there are clumps of silvery birches, elders, and maples. We sometimes discover a rugged hut, from which a column of smoke is ascending amidst the maples, from each of which a pail is suspended. The hours are long, the frostless cold increases, and the dullness of the day ends in rain. We alight in a precise and well-conditioned town among the hills, where marble is so common that it is used for fences and for the door-steps of frame houses. The life is placid, and the business is invisible, though the blocks of stores indicate no small measure of prosperity and ambition. But the littleness of purpose and achievement, in contrast with the vigorous metropolis that we left in the morning, is soon dismissed in the glow and crackle of a birch-wood fire, which seems to lubricate the whole being. The outer weather is nothing to us until morning, and in the morning our discontent is revived in finding that all the hills have disappeared in what Emerson graphically describes as "the tumultuous privacy of the storm." The fast-flying flakes, whirled by a biting wind, muffle the distance, and when in moments of respite the nearer hills shape themselves again, it is as in a mirage—dubious and vanishing. What consolation there is comes to us in the intimation that it is a sugar snow, which with the relaxation of a thaw will leave the maples in a soft, yielding condition; and

as it is to study the maples that we have ventured into this northern latitude, we take courage with the afternoon train for Shrewsbury, where the maple orchards are famous.

There are many groves on the way, bordered by sentinel evergreens, whose branches are overlaid by snow, and have the crisp whiteness of ostrich feathers. All down the slopes the maples have preponderance, and, like those we have already seen, are tapped, though beads of ice seal the incisions. In half an hour the train leaves us at one of the villages which Shrewsbury embraces, and we watch it disappear up the heavy grade in the confusion of the storm before we comprehend that we are standing alone on the platform of the *dépôt*, which is terraced in one mountain and confronted by another, with little more than a gully between. The snow is mystifying, and no tavern is visible among the cluster of houses in the hollow; but while we are debating as to our proper course, a young man opens the door of the station and invites us to come in. He is a small, wiry fellow, with sharp features; and over the Morse instrument, through which he has been exchanging civilities with the operator at Rutland, is a silver cornet.

"Do you play?" we inquire, as we linger before the stove, which is snapping with heat.

"Occasionally, at dances," he answers; and as he closes the door of the ticket office we notice that it is secured by a peculiar lock, which excites our interest.

"It's an invention of mine; I have a patent issued on it," he explains; and he then unfastens another door opening into a smaller apartment, strung before the window of which is a lot of watches, with various tools spread on the bench below for adjusting and repairing them. He applies himself to these with easy familiarity, and speaks of a fertilizer and Bible dictionary for which he is agent. At least six violins are hung against the wall; and as we pick at the strings of one of them he tells us, without any boastfulness, that this instrument also was made by him.

We do not wait to hear of his other occupations, as his versatility seems limitless, and we once more face the storm, following his directions down the hill to a little tavern in a street of less than a dozen houses, which, for all the life that can



GATHERING SAP IN A SNOW-STORM.

be seen, might be tenantless. Not a soul is afoot or discoverable through the windows, and our only greeting is from a half-bred bull-dog, whose growls give urgency to our raps at the tavern door, which, with some delay, is opened for us by a man who has been asleep, and is not yet fully awake.

"Boston or New York?" he inquires, after a superficial survey of us, which apparently convinces him that one of those two cities has cast us forth; and when we have answered him by registering, and have drawn chairs around the stove, he communicates the singular fact to us that he himself has been in the metropolis.

"I went daown with my daughter, and put up at a haouse somewhere near Madison Square—a new haouse of polished red brick. There's a heap of nonsense about them taverns o' yours. We sat daown at a table, and a fellow comes skipping up with a silver tray and a pencil and a piece of paper. That's all tomfoolery, that sort of thing is. What a man wants is good clean victuals with a flavor to 'em; but this fellow kept skipping araound with his silver tray, and when we got through I didn't know what we'd had to eat. I'd a sight liefer have a bit of boiled pork with milk gravy, or a cup of tea and a doughnut, than all the stuff they had on their bill of fare. And what do ye suppose they charged us?"

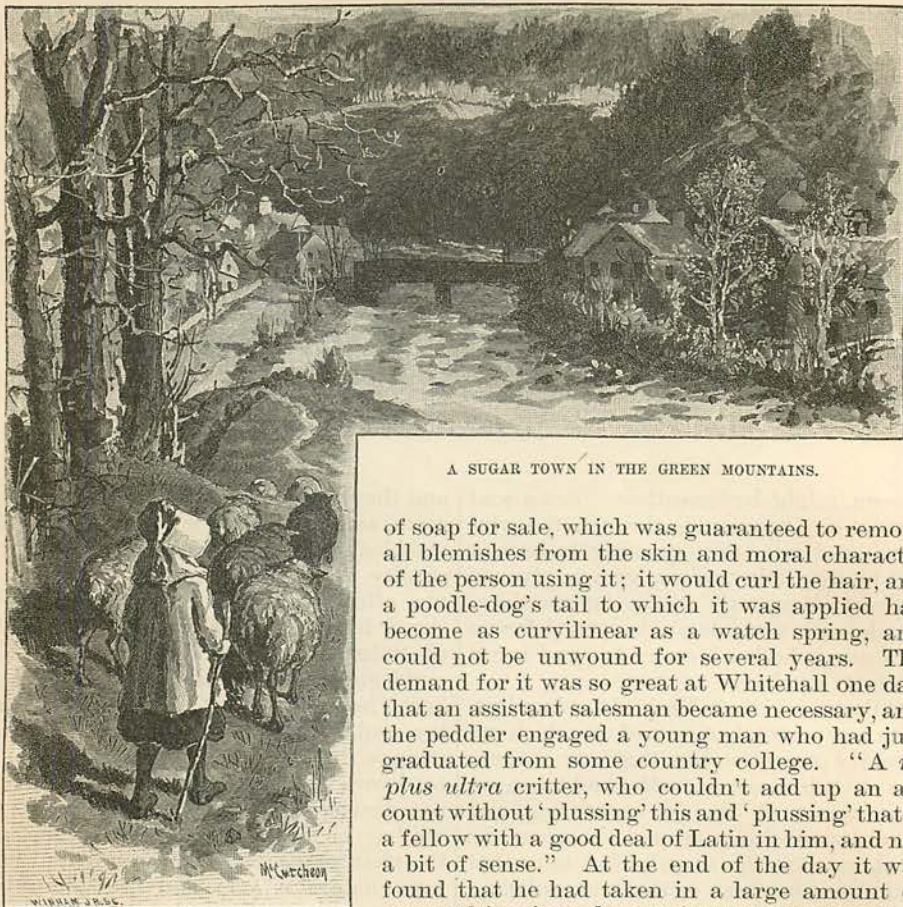
Supposing that he had blundered into Delmonico's, perhaps, we ironically suggested twenty-five cents.

"No, sir," he said, with emphasis, "though it wa'n't worth any more than that. They stuck us for two seventy-five;

and they charged us two dollars for one room, and two fifty for the other!" He wobbled with laughter at the delicious absurdity of the reminiscence, but a minute after his view of the exorbitance struck him querulously. "Yes," he added, "that's all confounded nonsense!"

"I guess you'll find it pretty wild up here," he went on. "We're a wild country and a wild people—it 'll seem as strange for you to be up here as for us to be daown to New York." But we were not dismayed by the prospect; we were willing to sacrifice personal comfort to the picturesque, and if we could find human nature simple and unmodernized among the mountains, we should be more than satisfied.

Our host himself was a local celebrity, who, in addition to the business of the tavern, officiated as auctioneer at all sales in the neighborhood. He was loquacious, and sometimes grandiose in a blundering way. His vocabulary was florid and various, and he was fond of displaying it, though the effect was often Malapropian. "There is a throne," he said, "set with diamonds, sardonics, and amaranthes, with vacillating waters shining around it, and palms waving their coruscating branches over it." What throne he referred to we do not know, but his description of it was amply pleasing and graphic to the villagers who happened to hear it. Once he had been the driver of a stage-coach, then a dealer in dry-goods, and then a peddler. "I surveyed all the professions," he said, modestly, "and concluded to be a Jack of all trades." While he was a peddler he had a popular article



A SUGAR TOWN IN THE GREEN MOUNTAINS.

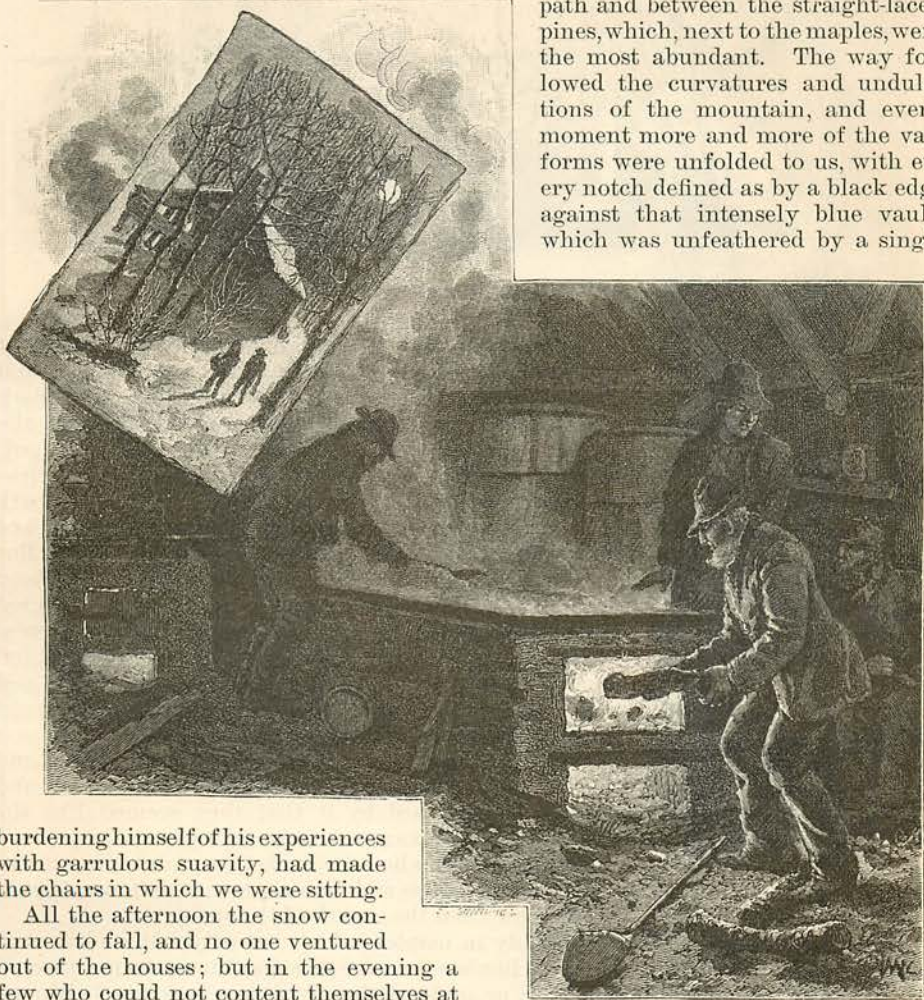
of soap for sale, which was guaranteed to remove all blemishes from the skin and moral character of the person using it; it would curl the hair, and a poodle-dog's tail to which it was applied had become as curvilinear as a watch spring, and could not be unwound for several years. The demand for it was so great at Whitehall one day that an assistant salesman became necessary, and the peddler engaged a young man who had just graduated from some country college. "A *ne plus ultra* critter, who couldn't add up an account without 'plussing' this and 'plussing' that—a fellow with a good deal of Latin in him, and not a bit of sense." At the end of the day it was found that he had taken in a large amount of counterfeit coin and a spurious ten-dollar note.

"Look here, you should be careful; that's bad," said the disgusted peddler, showing him the note, which was a common wood-engraving. "Bad? why, bless me," responded the innocent, in amazement, "I didn't know that a bank would issue counterfeit money!"

Not all of his anecdotes are repeatable; but one more is worth telling for the light it throws upon his versatility. He wished to purchase a team of horses from one Deacon Woodbury at S—, and a friend who was with him introduced him as Elder Dawley, to which he was about to object, when his companion whispered to him, "Be quiet, you'll get the team for twenty dollars less as a parson than as a layman"; and, indeed, the deacon was so devoutly considerate of the church that the purchase was effected on very easy terms. At dinner, however, the elder was called upon for grace before meat, and though unfamiliar with devotions of any kind, he was unwilling to expose the fraud to which he had lent himself, and he returned thanks with an unctious that put him high in the deacon's esteem. It became known that a minister was in the village, and he was invited to console a sick old man, which he did, as he says, to the entire satisfaction of all the relatives. On the following day, a lawyer having failed to appear for him, he conducted a case of his own in court, and in the afternoon wielded the hammer at an auction. Later in the evening the fiddler was missing from a dance, and he offered himself as a substitute. While he was poring over the music with great attentiveness, though he could not read a note, a child of yesterday's invalid happened to look in, and was struck aghast by the sight she saw. "Why, ma," she cried, as soon as she reached home, "would you believe it?—that old minister who was here yesterday is a-fiddling away like all possessed at the dance!"

If Mr. Dawley was unscrupulous, it is to be said in his favor that he was obliging, and that he possessed plenty of that Yankee adaptativeness which we had already observed in the station-master, who, as we found out while our host was un-

on the porch had shrunk to zero. All yesterday's snow was crisp and glazed, and creaked beneath the feet, and the wind was full of stings. The sugar-makers reflected the hue of the sky. But we were not to be confined, and set out up the whited mountains along a zigzag path and between the straight-laced pines, which, next to the maples, were the most abundant. The way followed the curvatures and undulations of the mountain, and every moment more and more of the vast forms were unfolded to us, with every notch defined as by a black edge against that intensely blue vault, which was unfeathered by a single



A SUGAR SHANTY AT NIGHT.

burdening himself of his experiences with garrulous suavity, had made the chairs in which we were sitting.

All the afternoon the snow continued to fall, and no one ventured out of the houses; but in the evening a few who could not content themselves at home came into the tavern, and deposited themselves around the stove with the apparent object of cooling it by a phenomenal frequency of expectoration. The village store over the way had a similar circle, and the silence and vacuity sent us early to bed.

The brilliant light that forced itself through our shutters next morning told us that the skies were clear. They were such a blue as we had never seen before in sunlight: a deep, luminous, midnight blue, and the mercury in the thermometer

cloud. In contrast with its surroundings, the noisy brook that held to the road like a dear companion was utterly black as it broke through the clotted snow and ice, which imprisoned it for a reach, and then let it burst forth with a contentious and vehement murmur. A chickadee that made a poor breast against the wind was the only visitant of the bird world that had come out on this piercing morning; and every branch snapped against the



THE SUGAR-MAKER'S DAUGHTER.

frosty seizure, while the loose dry leaves of the past autumn were borne shrieking along the compact and crusted snow. There were ghostly birches with dark scars on their bark, and heavily branched beeches; the austere firs were crested with downy white, and fringed, where the sun had struck them, with pendent icicles; and here was a wild cherry on a little knoll, with a bark of so rich and glistening a copper bronze that it looked like some warm artery veined against the sky. But outnumbering all the others were the maples, that stood inside the fences and out along the roadway, in scattered groups and single file, and in swarms on the slopes, where the distance between each was so narrow that the lower growths of the branches had been prevented, and it was only high above the ground that they could spread themselves. Hanging from each—scarcely one had not been tapped—was a red bucket or a tin pail; and the tin pails in the distance caught the sunshine, and were so emblazoned by it that they seemed like the shields of some advancing army. But not a drop of sap was flowing, and when the buckets contained any it was concealed under ice and frozen snow, which also formed a solid bow from the mouth of the spout.

There is a human and poetic quality in maples, which is easily felt, and though the land would be worth more for its lumber than for its sugar, many farmers would no more part with their maple bush or orchard than with any precious heirloom. There are careless and avaricious growers who bore their trees in several places at once, or before the proper season, and then the trees, like overdriven creatures, fail and die of exhaustion. The gentle method succeeds best, by prolonging the life, and to this end those whom we first mentioned devote something like affectionate care.

At the top of the mountain we met one of the largest sugar producers of the neighborhood, a gentleman who has an orchard of two thousand trees, and who lives in a long, low, old-fashioned house, out of every window of which the beautiful hills are seen undulating in such close lines that there seems to be little or no space between them—hills so profusely wooded that we could understand how applicable their name might be in summer, though they were now white and leafless in the wintry intrallment.

The glowing stove was an unspeakable blessing, for the wind had not abated nor lost its penetrativeness; and as we thawed ourselves the host placed a dish of apples

before us, with an invitation to eat, which is an almost invariable part of an introduction in Vermont. "Two days ago," he said, "I went to Rutland, and before leaving told the boys to tap as many trees as they could; but though the morning was soft and clear, I felt the approach of a storm in



A GREEN MOUNTAIN COUNTRY DANCE.

the afternoon, and as soon as I got home again I stopped the work—none too soon, either." A centre table was strewn with books, magazines, and newspapers, agricultural, religious, and secular. There were more books in the capacious window-seats, and though it seemed as far from the top of this hill to the city as from the top of a Sierra Nevada, the world and its immediate doings were scarcely less familiar up here than in Roxbury or Harlem.

One can venture among these mountains into spots which the whistle of the locomotive has never pierced, and where the mail is left in very small quantities by a dilapidated coach, without finding much that is genuinely primitive. The unenlightened but shrewd settlers of earlier days, who knew more of nature than of cities, are in their last generation, and the children have lost the simplicity and individuality of their progenitors. It is said that elementary education is more general in Vermont than in any other State, and with the little learning the irreverent spirit of the age has crept in. Those whose fathers wore homespun and were vigorously distinct in character, ape the ways of town, and are drifting into vulgar and uninteresting "cockneyism."

As Mr. Dawley said, "the ideas of the country are 'advanced.'" One afternoon



A COUNTRY AUCTION IN VERMONT.

we approached a queer old house, which had been a tavern in coaching days, and which now stood back from the highway, in great need of a coat of paint. The earth was piled around its tottering frame to a height of three or four feet, and the refuse of the barn-yard was scattered before it with unpromising thriftlessness. There flashed upon us a picture of what we should find within—a slovenly woman and children, the children dirty and crying, and the woman scolding. We tapped at the door—perhaps we might find a bit of old furniture, or a “character,” something picturesque, though neither clean nor comfortable. What we saw took our breath away. A young and pretty girl opened the door—a girl with all the unblemished purity and sweetness of maidenhood shining in her face; dressed neatly and in excellent taste, and wearing her hair plaited into a braid, from which not one vagrant hair escaped. Her father was away, but she ushered us into a small parlor, with a piano among its other furniture, wherein sat a smooth and dignified woman, her mother, who, when we blundered out some remark indicating our surprise at the comfort of the interior, said with some severity that city folks supposed the people living in the mountains to

be wild, but that there was as much intelligence and culture among them as among others. She uttered “culture” with the sibillant Bostonian twang, and that she possessed some of it herself was more than a matter of surmise, from the well-worn copies of Tennyson, Pope, and other poets on a side table. The exterior dilapidation was accounted for by their intention to build a new house in the spring, and the earth was piled up around the old one for greater warmth. As there was no place of public entertainment within six or seven miles, and as the first train was not due until late at night, we were glad of the tea she prepared for us—served in a brilliant silver urn of recent design, with sugar bowl and milk jug to match—and we spent a very pleasant evening before a crackling fire of birch.

While waiting for the weather to moderate, we were not without diversions. One day we listened to the florid eloquence of Mr. Dawley at an auction in “the flats,” where many curious characters were gathered; and another day was relieved by a country dance, which was attended by the young men and women from neighboring farms. The dance and the auction are almost the only dissipations the people know, and one yields

them about as much amusement as the other.

But at last the inimical wind fell, and what was left of it veered round toward the south. A radiant vapor now hung upon the hills; the creek fiercely repulsed

The sap was collected then in troughs, each about three feet long, hollowed out of sections of poplars, and was conveyed to the kettles in barrels, from which it was transferred by scoops. There were five or more kettles, from ten to thirty



OLD-FASHIONED SUGAR CAMP.

the ice, and hurried it away to dissolution, and the woods were full of a moisture which softened every sound. Quick to feel the genial change, the maples relaxed, and in all the groves sleds were moving and smoke was rising from the sugar-houses, while the sap dripped abundantly into the buckets, and the sound of its fall mingled with the patter of the snow melting on the feathered evergreens.

Sugar-making now and sugar-making as it was are very different things, and what it has gained in facility it has lost in picturesqueness. The old camp with its primitive appliances is no more; the "kettle" has been superseded by the "pan," and the trough is become a mass of crumbling decay. The women and children are kept at home, and no longer know the old-time delights of "sugaring off," though in the Arcadia of the past their services were not despised, and the whole household set up its abode in the woods.

gallons in capacity, and each was filled with sap, which was kept boiling, the larger kettles being refilled from the smaller ones as evaporation reduced the quantity. When the contents were reduced to a desired consistency, the hot syrup was dipped out and passed through a flannel strainer into covered tubs, from which again it was poured into a large, thick-bottomed kettle for the process of "stirring off," some milk and the whites of several eggs being added to it. Thus prepared, it was placed over a slow fire, and kept just below boiling-point until the sediment and all foreign matters in it floated to the top and were removed, when it became deliciously translucent. It was now exposed to a greater heat and gently boiled, the evaporation continuing, and bringing it nearer to the point of granulation. Now the sugar-maker was all watchfulness, and it fared ill with those who distracted him, for if the golden liquid seething in

the kettle boiled the least bit too much, it would become dry in quality, while if it boiled too little, it would become "soggy." He tested it constantly, plucking threads of it from his stirring stick, and trailing them round in cups of cold water. While the threads yielded waxy to the touch, the sugar was not yet done, but as soon as one broke crisp between his fingers, the moment had come to take the kettle off the fire. As the sugar began to cool, it crystallized round the sides, and gradually the whole mass, under a vigorous stirring, became granular.

In that way sugar was made years ago, and when the sap flowed profusely the operations were continued through the night, and the fires cast strange shadows in the woods. But instead of a hut of logs a permanent sugar-house is now built, and furnished with many elaborate devices to prevent waste and deterioration. Formerly, when the maples were tapped with an auger, an "elder quill" was inserted in the incision to conduct the sap into the trough below; that is, a small piece of elder wood about three inches long with the pith bored out of it, which formed a tube; but in most or-

chards to-day a galvanized iron spout is used, which has the advantage of not souring the sap nor choking many pores. Everything is "improved." The collections are made with the unvarying order of collections from letter-boxes, and if the grove is on a hill, and the sugar-house is in a hollow, the sap, as it is gathered, is emptied into a "flume," which quickly conducts it to a large reservoir within the building, wherein it is strained through cloth. A scoop or a ladle is as anachronistic as a javelin. From the reservoir the sap is conducted, as required, through tin pipes into a "heater," whence it passes through a series of iron tubes to be delivered, after straining, in a condition for "sugaring off."

Maple sugar as it reaches the market is of a clearer color for all these improvements; but there are some who actually say that the flavor has fallen off, and that the new patent evaporators are a snare. One change has certainly not been for the better, and that is the abandonment of the social life of the old camps, which made sugar-time in the Green Mountains enduring memories with those who are now ebbing away.

AN ENGLISH CATHEDRAL.

EVERY cultivated mind has doubtless its own classic ground, and its own personal associations of interest, if not of affection. However differing in the origin or the motives of their enthusiasm, assuredly there will never be any lack of pilgrims to their favorite shrines throughout all the world. Yet it has always seemed to me that the soil and the monuments of old England must of necessity be to the American visitor the subjects of a warmer interest and a closer regard than any foreign localities can possibly be to the Englishman. The English traveller in Greece or Italy may, indeed, visit the scenes of noble deeds, and wander among the remains of classic civilization; he may climb the Acropolis to recall the poetry and the arts which gave an undying lustre to the age of Pericles, or linger in the Forum as he wonders at the grandeur of the Cæsars. Yet there must always be something very *foreign* to him in it all. To the American, on the other hand, almost every step on English soil is full of memories of his own kith and

kin and blood, and all the literature and poetry of his life, from the nursery up to adult manhood, is brought vividly before him at almost every turn. He will see on many a time-worn finger-board in Oxfordshire the precise number of miles to Banbury Cross. In Nottinghamshire, on the borders of Lincoln, he may stroll under the noble oaks that still flourish as the remains of Sherwood Forest. He may angle for barbel in the silver Thames from the very banks of the little islet of Runnymede. He will find the golden wheat of Leicestershire waving thick over the slopes of Bosworth Field. He will turn to the spire of Stratford as a beacon among the green lanes of Warwick and Kenilworth. And driving through the shades of Twickenham and Sheen, he may tread the terraces of royal Windsor, and hear the curfew from Stoke Pogis church-yard pealing out over the rich woods that embosom that stately domain. Every look is full of cherished association, and every step seems to fall on hallowed yet familiar ground.