

THE SQUIRREL'S HIGHWAY.

THE venturous gossamer thrown floating on the breeze is not more precious to its parent spinner, nor is the pastoral brook dearer to its friend the kingfisher, than is the rural fence to our nimble rover the red squirrel. He is its constant companion, its chosen messenger, and is as much a part of its life history as are the twining vines and tendrils that cluster and wave about its mossy stones or timbers.

He is the protégé of the hollow rail, the welcome guest of many a chink and cranny among the tumbling walls. Well do the lichens and mosses among those crevices





know the soft caress of his palpitating fur! and to those of us who have so often watched his agile zigzag course along the road-side, has it not sometimes seemed as if those old gray rails would miss the clinging pattering of his feet?

Not but that there are other welcome touches of companionship known to these gray timbers—the feathery contact of bluebird, or the fluttering tremor of the bobolink in his love rhapsody upon the jutting rail. There is the vibrant tap of woodpecker on the bar post, or the unwelcome grip of pigeon-hawk awaiting his prey upon this well-known thoroughfare.

But these are mostly chance loiterings

THE EDGE OF THE FIELD.

and transitory episodes, and while such casual visitors know the fence chiefly as a passing resting-place, or coigne of vantage, the squirrel has learned it in its length and breadth. He has traversed its every nook and corner, and so surely as the chattering screech of the halcyon shall lead you on to the rarest of the brook's

wild retreats, so truly will the beckonings of that frisking tail signal the way to their parallels amid the rural landscape.

Where is the picturesque old manse, the ancient orchard, or rumbling mill that is not strung upon the line of some old rambling fence or wall? Their net-work incloses the entire landscape in its meshes like seams in the great coverlet of farms, woods, and meadows—a patchwork in which the criss-cross stitches of the zigzag rails do time-honored duty.

I am told by foreign tourists that while many of our fences are reflected in those of other lands, the counterpart of the zigzag fence is to be seen in no other country. It is typical of Yankeeland.

It is known as the snake or Virginia fence, and as the relic of a lavish era of unlimited forestry. History does not chronicle the name of its inventor, but I have long since learned to cherish a profound respect for the memory of this unknown individual. It is hard for me to imagine in the person of this primitive rail-splitter the picture of an untutored backwoodsman, and I never follow the course of one of these fences without feeling a certain consciousness that its original builder must have seen his work through eyes artistic as well as practical.

The careless abandon of its lines—a repetition of form in which absolute repetition is continually defied by the capricious convolution of the grain, for there are no two rails made in the same mould—and their gray satiny sheen, their weather-beaten stains of moss and lichen, and the ever-changing play of lights and shadows from their waving weeds and vines, make the old rail fence truly an object of real beauty in our landscape. Often have I lingered in its angles, and a hundred times have I thought of the host of pictures and reminiscences which might fill a book to the glory of a fence corner.

Moreover, this peculiarity of conformation panders to a most worthy and blessed shiftlessness happily latent in the bones of almost every farmer, for while the ploughshare creeps close along the base of the old stone wall, and the direct course of most other fences offers a free scope for the mower's scythe or the reaper's blade, the outward corners of the zigzag fence dodge beyond its reach, and thus escape. How often, too, are these recesses the convenient storage quarters for the stones and stubble of the field, and as such receive a

wide berth from the newly whetted scythe or cradle.

Thus does the old rail fence bedeck itself abundantly with wreaths and garlands. The refuse stone piles clothe themselves in tangles of creeping dew-berry, cinque-foil, and ground-ivy; and the round leaves of the creeping mallows conspire to hide their nakedness. Tall brambles rise and yield their snowy blossoms to the rifling bees, or later hang their purple fruit in tempting clusters to the troop of boys in their eager scramble among the rails. There are no black raspberries so large and luscious, no hazel-nuts so full and brown, and no filberts so tantalizing beneath their prickly pods, as those that grow up under the protection of the old rail fence. Here the rich green beds of sweet-fern give out their aromatic savor to the wise old simpler, the eager small boy, or even to the squirrel in quest of the nutty kernels among its seed bobs. The dull red blossoms of the glycine tell of sweet tubers beneath the ground, and the bright sunflowers of tall artichokes invite the old-time search among their roots.

Here in these sheltered angles the eddying November winds hurl their flying leaves, and heap the glory of the autumn present upon the matted mould of many autumns past. Later, the whistling gales of winter whirl about its corners. Clouds of drifting snow bedim the evergreens, and drive along the meadow, battling with the army of tall gaunt mulleins and red-capped sumacs, and at last are whirled along these weather-beaten timbers, where fantastic peaked Alps arise, and overhanging glistening cliffs hem in the rambling rails in great blue-shadowed crescents white and dazzling.

Here, too, the icy air shall ring with the shouts of those same voices that are known so well by the rural fence through every month and season, with their rollicking testimonies of wild-flower parties and squirrel hunts and nutting exploits.

And now the white day echoes with the hilarity of those half-muffled voices from the depths of the white blockade, where, with "mittened hands and caps drawn low," the village truants undermine the glittering pile, and make "a tunnel wall-ed and overlaid with dazzling crystal."

The old farm coasting path is near by upon the long knoll slope. We see the jouncing "thank you, marm," built

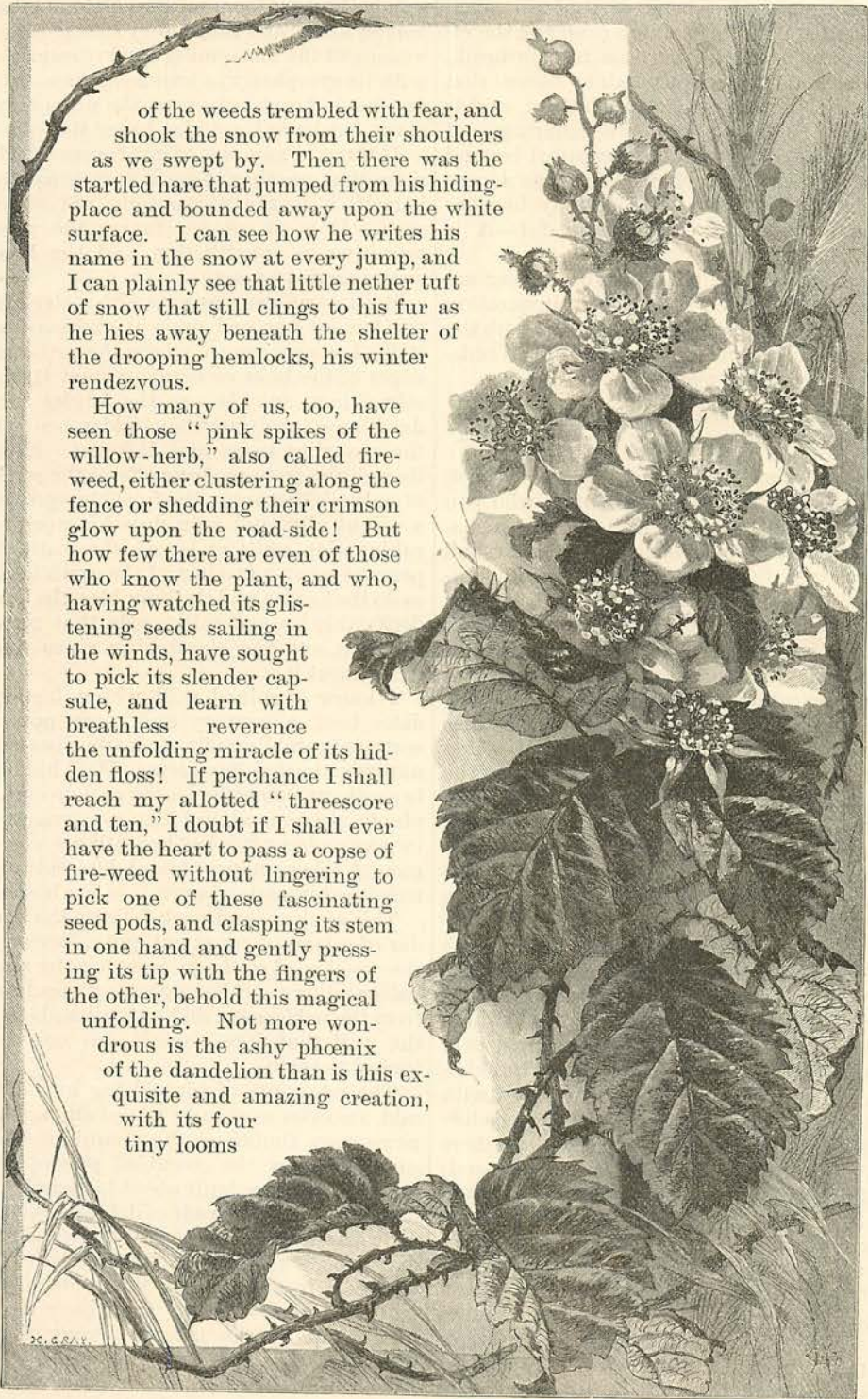


A WINTER SHELTER.

up above the wall with rails, and packed with snow. How, in those reckless days when hearts were light and life was new, we shot across this flashing crust, and like a glancing arrow flew in mid-air out above the wall! I remember how the slender phantoms

of the weeds trembled with fear, and shook the snow from their shoulders as we swept by. Then there was the startled hare that jumped from his hiding-place and bounded away upon the white surface. I can see how he writes his name in the snow at every jump, and I can plainly see that little nether tuft of snow that still clings to his fur as he hies away beneath the shelter of the drooping hemlocks, his winter rendezvous.

How many of us, too, have seen those "pink spikes of the willow-herb," also called fire-weed, either clustering along the fence or shedding their crimson glow upon the road-side! But how few there are even of those who know the plant, and who, having watched its glistening seeds sailing in the winds, have sought to pick its slender capsule, and learn with breathless reverence the unfolding miracle of its hidden floss! If perchance I shall reach my allotted "threescore and ten," I doubt if I shall ever have the heart to pass a copse of fire-weed without lingering to pick one of these fascinating seed pods, and clasping its stem in one hand and gently pressing its tip with the fingers of the other, behold this magical unfolding. Not more wondrous is the ashy phoenix of the dandelion than is this exquisite and amazing creation, with its four tiny looms



A BRAMBLE CLUSTER.

that spin in a second of time an evanescent spirit fabric which consigns the efforts of a human lifetime into insignificance—a marvellous subtle sheen that flashes in the sun but an instant, and is gone. It is always awe-inspiring and wonderful to me; it is beautiful beyond description; and when I see those snowy spirit forms take wing and fly heavenward, it is more than beautiful—it is divine.

There is too little humility among nature students, too little of that inspiration which comes from seeking nature with the bowed head and bended knee of Wordsworth when he avows,

“To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.”

But whether disciple of a school or not, whether artist, poet, or layman, who can gainsay that such an attitude toward nature shall yield a harvest of deeper and increased delight, not merely in the contemplation of the foot-print, but even as truly in the study of limitless panorama?

Is there not to me an added charm in the pink flush that mantles the side of yonder mountain-spur when I know so well that it is shed by the myriads of blossoms in an acre of these same beautiful spikes of fire-weed? And as my eye follows the cool cloud shadow as it glides down upon the mountain-slope, among the varied patchwork of its fields and farms, is there not a deepened significance to every separate tint that tells me something of its being?

If in the faint yellow checkered forms I see fields of billowing wheat and barley, and recall a hundred of their associations, or if from that quaintly dotted patch there comes a whiff from a sweet-scented field with its cocks of new-mown hay, its skimming swallows and ringing scythes, with here a luminous gray of sandy meadow fresh from the plough or harrow, and there a weed-grown copse lit up with golden-rod; if that kaleidoscopic medley of grays and olives and browns tells me of its pastures with their tinkling bells, of its fragrant beds of everlasting, ferns, and hardhack, its trailing junipers and its moss-flecked boulders, and each of these in turn draws me still closer, and whispers something of itself, the everlasting with its pendent jewel, the orchis with its little confidant and nursling, the gentian with its close-kept secret and its never-opened eye; if

yonder bluish bloom means a field of blueberries to me, and that snowy sweep brings visions of the blossoming buckwheat field with its symphony of hummingbees—tell me, have I not only seen the mountain-slope, but have I not also heard its voice?

If there is any one of our fences which more than another seems a part of nature herself, it is the picturesque old stone wall. It is of all our fences the most primitive in construction and the least contaminated by art.

Built of nature's unwrought materials, she has set her seal upon it and marked it for her own; even where the artificial edges of the blast or hammer show themselves, how quickly are the angles subdued, how surely are they hidden beneath the covering moss and lichens! Even though the prim contour offend the sense of nature's harmony, the frost king proves a potent ally, and soon does his work of subjugation, until at length the wall appears as much a product of the earth itself as do the bushes and the brambles, the burdocks, thistles, and milkweeds, that grow beside it, and the clambering vines that cling about it.

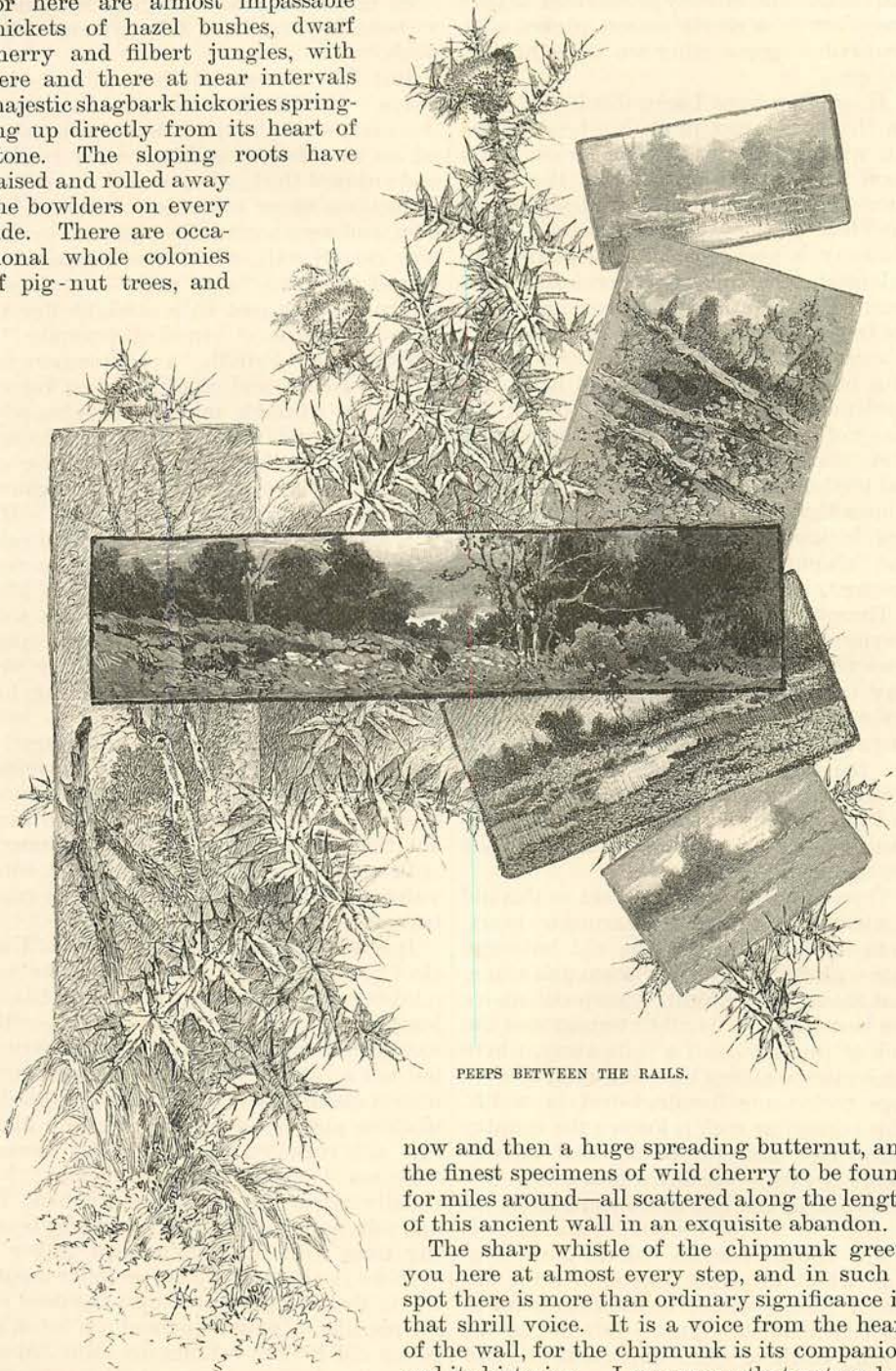
I know a ruined wall whose history dates back a century and more, now a scattered rambling pile of weather-beaten, nature-saturated boulders. Half hidden beneath its covering leaves and creeping plants, it seems almost like a grave, and in many places it is lost beneath a covered mound, where nature has at last entirely reclaimed it, and wrapped it in her bosom.

This ancient landmark follows the border of a lane of equal antiquity, formerly the wood road of the pioneer forester who redeemed its neighboring sunny meadows from the wilderness, and whose hands laid the wall that, like himself, has now returned to earth.

The remnants of his old log hut, it is said, are even now to be traced among the new-grown timber on the mountain-side, surrounded by the crumbled pile of the massive log fence built about his primitive habitation as a barricade of defense against prowling wolves and bears—and even Indians too, if the record of the sod is to be believed; for many are the tomahawks and flint arrow-heads that have been turned up by the plough among these meadows.

This wall has long since gone out of service, but its innumerable foster-children have risen up to do duty in its stead;

for here are almost impassable thickets of hazel bushes, dwarf cherry and filbert jungles, with here and there at near intervals majestic shagbark hickories springing up directly from its heart of stone. The sloping roots have raised and rolled away the bowlders on every side. There are occasional whole colonies of pig-nut trees, and



PEEPS BETWEEN THE RAILS.

now and then a huge spreading butternut, and the finest specimens of wild cherry to be found for miles around—all scattered along the length of this ancient wall in an exquisite abandon.

The sharp whistle of the chipmunk greets you here at almost every step, and in such a spot there is more than ordinary significance in that shrill voice. It is a voice from the heart of the wall, for the chipmunk is its companion and its historian. I am aware that nature has given this little fellow several black marks.

He is doubtless a little thief, often making havoc among the farmer's stores, and taking his regular three meals a day from the granary. As a type of greed his name is almost proverbial. His vast subterranean store-houses bear witness to his

acquisitive and miserly proclivities, as they are often in a single season packed with provender representing ten times his actual need.

How often have I seen this little fellow on the homeward jump, his head puffed out with a pig-nut in each cheek and a third between his teeth! But the inference thus conveyed is as undeserving as the black marks which he carries. If his gluttony is proverbial, it is equally providential. He must not therefore be condemned as a professional gourmand, for his true vocation—the one with which he is accredited in the book of nature—is that of a most skillful planter and landscape gardener. We have him to thank for many of our most highly prized specimens of standard trees. It is from the providential plethora of his subterranean treasure-houses that have sprung these noble oaks and hickories, these massive chestnuts, and this outburst of hazel and wild cherry among this bed of stone.

There are other tenants that people its crevices. The little weasel has his beaten tracks among them, where he threads his way in search of hiding field-mice that make their nests beneath the stones. The chipmunk sometimes encounters him in the hallway of his burrow, where this dreaded enemy has lain in wait for him, and the partridge is surprised by that same stealthy approach while searching for buds among the hazels.

There is hardly a square foot in this old barricade that I have not learned by heart, from its beginning at the old balanced gate with its long jutting beam and stone, that makes its creaking sweep out above the barn-yard, to its other terminus at the end of the lane half a mile away, where the scattered stones thin out upon a broad bare rock some hundred feet in width. This particular rock is known the country round as "Lawsuit Rock," and thereby hangs a tale. We have heard of a certain rock in the bed of Concord River on which four townships bound, and there is a well-known veteran oak in New England which drops its acorns in three different States, whose boundaries meet at the centre of its trunk. But not in the history of these more important and historical landmarks is there to be found such a record of feud and strife as that which had its scene of action on this old flat rock, and that, too, simply because it had the misfortune to figure in a

deed of property as "y^e gray rock near y^e boundary fence of Ziby Freeman, his pitch."

But Ziby Freeman is long since in his grave. His hands were not mixed up in this early strife, but tradition says he looked on in safety from his neutral ground and enjoyed the fun between the two lively factions whose possessions bordered his own, and were nominally separated by this now ruined wall, which was supposed to extend from this "gray rock"—ay, there's the rub—"due east in a straight line to y^e mile-stone on y^e Trumbull turnpike."

But Caleb Prindle, a contemporaneous townsman, and chief fence-viewer of the town through many years, happily still lives, and while past his eightieth birthday, bids fair, with the promise of his erect figure and ruddy bloom of countenance, to become a centenarian. He is a materialized sunbeam, and his heart is so warm that it seems to have thawed every vestige of the winter of his life, excepting perhaps the snow of his soft white hair, which falls in a silken avalanche upon his shoulders. There are two smaller tufts of snow thatching his brows, but Uncle Caleb heeds them not, and he looks out brightly and happily through their foreshadowing. His mind is like a crystal, and even his boyhood does not as yet seem so far away to him but that he can recount its occurrences with a minuteness of incident often convulsing to himself as well as royally contagious to his ever-ready hearers.

It is a treat indeed to interview old Uncle Caleb, and draw him out on the reminiscences of this flat rock. It is like a long chapter in some colonial novel—with a large preponderance of comedy, it is true, but not a little of the deep pathos of genuine romance—to hear him tell of the tribulations and the complications of which this old rock was the innocent cause. "Ye see it cum ababout in this way," he usually begins, as he throws his head to one side, and enforces his remarks by beating time with his outstretched finger—"ye see it all cum by that ar feller a-puttin' in thet old gray rock into the deed so car'less like, 'n' makin' so much a p'int on't. Naow old Roderick Emmons alluz sed ez haow the deed wa'n't wuth the paper it wuz writ on, cuz they wa'n't a 'foresaid,' ner a fus' part, er a secon' part, 'n' sech, into it from the beginnin' teu the end on't. But I'll tell ye haow it wuz. Ye see, in



GRAPE CLUSTERS.

them times thet ar rock yender wa'n't no bigger'n a bar'l head—thet is, wut you cud see on't—'n' it wa'n't no gret nuther, only jest stuck aout the graound a leetle, kinder flat 'n' low daown like, ye know. But ye see"—here the face lights up, the eyes begin to twinkle, and the wrinkled lips must needs be wiped with the red bandana handkerchief ere he takes up the thread—"ye see, when thet ar feller on the up side—thet wuz Acel Benson (he wuz the gret-gran'ther of Elijah Benson, daown the road a spell; ye kin see his haouse thar threu the trees daown in the holler)—but ye see, w'en he cum to plough up thar on his side—they wa'n't no fence thar then—he kep' a-runnin' agraoun' on this pesky stun bot-tom, 'n' w'en he cum to clear up the gravel a piece, he see haow the old 'bar'l hed' wuz consid'able of a *spreader* all araoun'. Now w'en he cum to look on't a minnit, 'n' kinder cogitatin' like, it somehow cum into his hed, ye know, ez haow the *hull* on't was a 'gray rock.' 'N' he jest went to hum, 'n' took a car'ful readin' o' the deed—kinder sorter *prarfle* like, ye know. Naow he wuz consid'able l'arned, 'n' wuz a gret meetin' man, 'n' he wuz a consid'able bizniss man teu—b'leaved in keepin' clus to the *letter* on't. So he wa'n't long in decidin', I kin tell ye, 'n' he wuz aout thar agin with his team in jest abaout a shake uv a lamb's tail. 'N' he went to work 'n' scooped aout the turf abaout seventy-five feet along Ziby Freeman's fence until he struck the edge o' the rock, 'n' then wut did the feller do but put up his stake thar, 'n' run his fence line 'due east to the turnpike,' jest ezac'y ez wuz called fer in the writin' of the deed."

Uncle Caleb's narrative is always broken here, and it does one good to see his keen enjoyment as he rubs his knees and, with head thrown back, gives vent to his loud "Haw! haw! haw! What times them fellers hed! I never see sech goin's on."

"Ye see, thet tuk in consid'able of a piece o' graoun', 'n' he hed the law onto his side teu. Then, I tell ye, cum the fun.

"Naow wait a minnit," he expostulated, eagerly, as I was about to ask a question; "jes lemme go on tell I git through. Ye see, old Acel he gut fired with a sorter high 'n' holy zeal, 'n' wuz 'tarnal anxysis all on a sudden to git up thet ar line fence, 'n' they wuz a sight o' small stun araoun' thar a-waitin'. So he went aout, 'n' gut all his nabers to come araoun' 'n' gin 'im a lift,

'n' he hed a reg'lar fence bee. Lor'! they didn't know wut he wuz up to, ye know. They wa'n't a-thinkin' so much of stun walls abaout thet time ez they wuz abaout thet ar gingerbread 'n' pie 'n' cider 'n' sech a-cummin'; but I tell ye they kep' at it clus until the old wall, sech ez it wuz, wuz built whar Acel said."

At this point of his story we always knew just what to expect. The ruddy color has gradually stolen to his ears, and now his bald head shows its glow. His eyes have become nervous and restless in their added twinkle beneath their shaggy brows. And now he begins to shake all over; every laughing wrinkle in his old face is brought into play; his tongue rolls between his wrinkled lips; and the old red handkerchief must soon come into requisition in mopping off the tears that trickle down among the wrinkles of his cheeks, as he tells in broken sentences of "the fun them fellers hed," and "haow them stun did fly."

"Ye see, this other feller—thet is, the feller on the daown side, Giles Farchild, ye know—he lived consid'able of a piece off on the turnpike, 'n' putty soon he gut wind on't, 'n' he gut lookin' et the deed *teu*, 'n' nateral enuff *his* readin' on't wuz kinder different from Acel's readin'. So he thort ez haow it wuz abaout time to clear up *his* lan' a leetle, ye know, 'n' git rid o' them stun. Then, I tell ye, come the fun. I don't b'lieve they ever *wuz* a wall ez hed sech a lively time in buildin' ez this one. Fi'tin'!—Leuther! I never heerd on sech fi'tin'. Lor'! haow the hull lot on 'em did turn aout! It looked et one time mighty like ez if the hull taown wuz takin' a han', 'n' Giles Farchild with his folks, 'n' Acel Benson with his'n, one a-heavin' on the stun, 'n' t'other a-rippin' of 'em up, 'n' shyin' 'em araoun' like all possessed. I never see sech goin's on. Leuther! how them stun did fly! Haw! haw! haw! I tell ye, in *its time*, thet old wall thar hez travelled pretty much all over the meddy, 'n' they's no tellin' but wut them ar stun might 'a been a-shyin' naow, ef it wa'n't for Jotham Nichols a-steppin' up 'n' buyin' on 'em aout, 'n' j'inin' on 'em. But, *Leuther!* haow them stun did fly!"

Then followed another long convulsive scene of merriment, which gradually seemed to shake out all the laugh that was left in him for the time being. When he had finally subsided, he leaned back in his



THE SIDE-HILL PASTURE.

chair, and continued in a more subdued tone:

"But old Acel's dead 'n' gone teu his final reck'nin', 'n' I dessay like 'nuff he'll stand ez good a show thar ez a good many on us ez is kinder injyin' on his worldly capers."

"Is it true, Uncle Caleb," I inquired, "that Acel had a touch of insanity?"

"Wa'al, I dunno—I dunno. They is folks wat sez he wuz kinder crazy on the subject—kinder graspin' 'n' averishis like, ye know; but I dunno. They ain't no use talkin', he wuz drefle sot—drefle sot—'n' he wuz ez odd ez Dick's hat-band; but I ain't so sartin about the *crazy*. I'm call'latin' they wa'n't much of the *crazy*. Lor' bless ye, no, they wa'n't an insane bone in his body, any more'n they is in his drefle likely offspring daown the road yender. He's old Acel right over agin—smarter'n chain lightnin', 'n' ekully law-abidin' 'n' speritooal—gret meetin' man."

The story of Uncle Caleb did not stop here, however; indeed, we had yet heard but its beginning, for there were long years of bitterness that followed from this scene of early strife, enmities and estrangements that were handed down from father to son, and to children's children. The tattered pages of the old town records still bear silent witness to many of his recollections, and show how potent were the influences of this early feud in the administration of titles, legacies, and even large inheritances.

There were episodes, too, which, from

the deep tremor of Uncle Caleb's voice, showed too plainly how close they had come to the heart of our aged story-teller himself, for there was no lack of the tender pathos of the old, old story. There were long estrangements, and heart-aches, and even the legendary lore of witchcraft and mysterious tragedy had found their place in his romantic narrative ere he finished.

One relic of these colonial days still exists—it lies close by upon our squirrel's highway, and this nimble climber knows it well. It is the old deserted house of Acel Benson—a moss-grown ruin, full of weird and strange tradition. For is it not known many miles around as the "house with a haunted well"? Have I not heard over and over again of that mysterious light that flickers and dances above the well-curb?—how, in the dead of night,

"A pale blue flame sends out its flashes
Through creviced roof and shattered sashes?"

—how it plays and prances about that old house like a witching sprite searching with his lantern for a clew that was never found, now emerging above the chimney-top, now hovering along the weed-grown eaves, where the startled bats come out and swoop about its halo, and at last how it flits across the tangled yard, hovers a moment above the well, and disappears?

There are those among the aged townspeople who yet tell of old-time midnight vigils at the Benson fence—watching for the first glimmer of that lambent flame

above the well-curb—and more than one white-haired matron I could mention to whom this playful will-o'-the-wisp is but a ghostly visitor from the other world.

Old Aunt Huldy was prone to tell, with half-frightened look and bated breath, of the "terrible secret of the old Benson well," and of the unpardoned soul that was doomed to "hant the arth tell the Angil Gabriel should blow his horn."

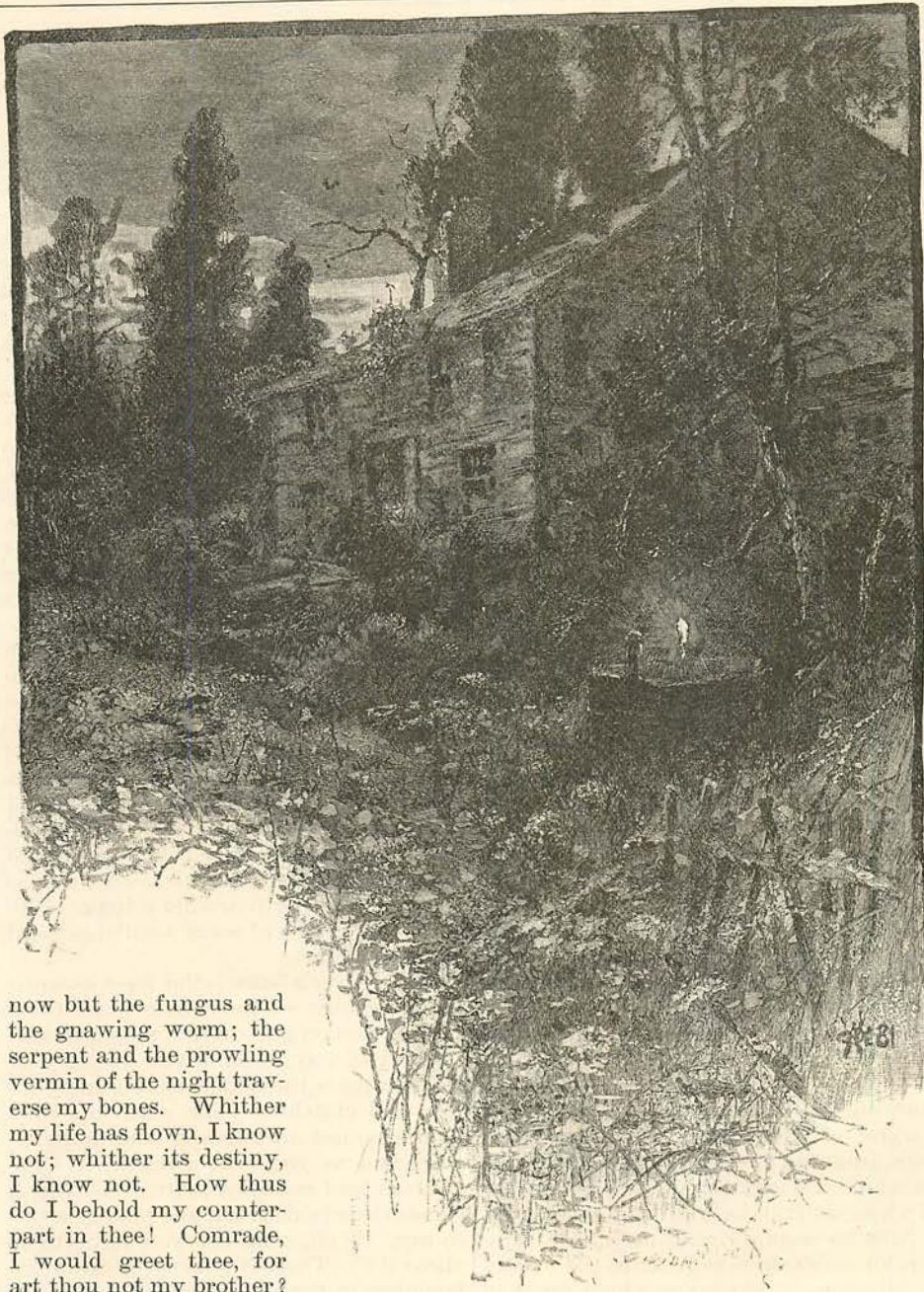
What is the secret of that overwhelming depression that weighs upon one's being when in the presence of an old deserted house? It overpowers you. You may strive to laugh it down, but the echo of that laugh is a weird reproof and mockery; you may strive to reason it away, but it is not obedient to the intellect; it is not the slave of reason. Come with me to that old house in the shadows of the twilight, and see how quickly are the smiles of ridicule dispelled.

I sought this ruin upon an autumn evening; I picked my way through its wilderness of weeds, following the beaten track of some prowling tenant that had his chosen path to door and cellar way. I saw the yawning roof; I saw the yellow leaves of twenty years that had been whisked in at the gaping sashes, and had been whirled by the blustering wind into great piles in the damp corners. I looked out upon the high-grown weeds and mildewed lilacs that swayed against the window-sills. The drop of the squirrel's nut rattled on the rafters overhead, and every sheltered corner was festooned with heavy cobwebs laden with the dust of generations. I saw the chimney-place, the old brick oven with its empty void, and in the fire-place below an ashy ember of an old back-log lying upon the hearth that once was radiant in its glow. Here were worn hollows in the floor that seemed to speak—imprints of the old arm-chair that told whole volumes of past cozy comfort at this fireside; here a nick in the plastered wall, and a round spot above, which, with the testimony of the dents in the floor beneath, told plainly of the evening pipe and the figure in the tilted chair. There was a cupboard door with its worn spot about the knob; here a rusty nail with the shadow of its hanging coat still plainly visible upon the wall—a hundred things, and each seemed trying to tell its story in some mysterious language of its own.

I sought out the nooks and cupboards,

and I remember at length finding myself lost in a deep day-dream merely at the sight of a mildewed fragment which I had kicked up on the floor. It was nothing but a musty bit of leather—nothing but a little baby shoe turned up from a pile of rubbish on the closet floor.

There was an oppressive suggestive stillness that found my ear ever on the alert for some half-expected whisper from every gloomy corner, and that riveted my restless eyes as though seeking for an answering look from every dark recess. Why do you peer so slowly and cautiously into the shadows of the dark closet? Why do you so often turn and glance behind as you pass among its gloomy passages? What is it that you seek? And as you reach the top of those tottering stairs, why that quick and sweeping glance? why that shudder but half concealed? Yes, it is damp. The air is heavy with the emanations of mould and rotting timbers. But it is not the chill that brings the shudder; it is not the dampness. The soggy floors break and crumble beneath your feet, and you draw your wraps close about you as you pick your way through its dank and musty halls, so clammy cold. The doors have fallen from their hinges, and lie in shapeless heaps among the rotten timbers of the floor. The toppling rafters and sagging beams are tumbling from their moorings, and are damp with slimy mildew, and peopled with destroying worms. Snails and lizards are crushed beneath your foot-steps, and as you hurry toward the door, the coils of a skulking snake disappear before you among the dark holes in the timbers. You are weighed down with a sense of the loneliness and desolation of this old house. But there is a still deeper impress. As you stand and look back upon its sightless hollow eyes and crumbling frame, there is something besides the sighing of its pines, something in its uncanny silence, something in its clammy breath, which speaks, and it says: "I am dead. My life has flown, and I am returning to the mould that gave me being. Time was when these timbers glowed with ruddy warmth, and thrilled with throbbing pulses of the living, when these silent halls echoed with the ring of joyous voices, and these sightless windows were merry with laughing eyes that looked out from the life within. But now have these things left me. Behold in me a mouldering thing! Naught knows me



now but the fungus and the gnawing worm; the serpent and the prowling vermin of the night traverse my bones. Whither my life has flown, I know not; whither its destiny, I know not. How thus do I behold my counterpart in thee! Comrade, I would greet thee, for art thou not my brother? Thy body is but a shell like me, thyself only its brief tenant, and soon shall cast it off, and leave it even as I am left."

The fence no longer serves as the squirrel's highway to this old haunt. The mossy boards and pickets have long since lent their essence to nourish the growth

THE HAUNTED HOUSE.

of weeds that now obscure them. The squirrel of colonial days knew them well, but the nimble rover of to-day must needs reach his old rookery by a branch highway from tree to tree, from which he finds his path to the mossy shingles. Present-

ly he appears at the little curved window in the gable, crouches a moment, and launches himself through the air, landing with clinging feet upon the hickory bough that sways beneath him as he bounds along. At the trunk he pauses, rummages beneath a shag of bark, and in a moment more we hear his snicker, and the loud scraping of his teeth upon the hard white nutshell.

The shell-bark hickory is the squirrel's favorite store-house. A quick stroke of axe or sledge on one of these trunks will often dislodge numbers of nuts which have been packed away and wedged beneath the loose shags of bark by these provident little fellows. I remember a pocketful of nuts thus gathered from a single tree in a midwinter ramble in the snow-crust; and I remember, too, the scolding protest from the interior, and the two black eyes at the knot-hole.

But the scraping sound has ceased, the empty nut has rattled among the branches, the squirrel has left his perch, and now we see him tacking back and forth upon the fence with flying colors. Here he makes a sudden halt, followed by a crouch and spring to the branch of the low-hanging apple-tree. This old crag has learned to know his grip, and gets its daily shake of companionship. The apples of autumn tumble about him as he speeds along, and in spring he makes a whirling tumult among the bees, leaving a mimic snow-fall in the shower of blossoms in his track as he leaps up on the corn-crib eaves and pries and scolds about that protecting piece of tin upon its roof.

How well he knows every inch upon his path! Here he makes a long clean jump across the middle of a certain rail, knowing well of that hornets' nest beneath—a nest of paper, by-the-way, made, perhaps, from the gray fibres of the very rail on which it hangs—a parcel of the nature of whose contents he is only too well aware.

Now he takes a circuit on a lower timber, for no cause save perhaps the memory of some sly slip-noose which came so near being his doom in its artful poise above the rail. Here he lingers with a wistful look at the empty robin's nest between the cross-beams, and there are visions of bright blue eggs, and a golden quaff from rare blue cups. The stuffy little wren in her post-hole citadel hears the vibrant murmur of his approach along the boards, and plants herself at the opening

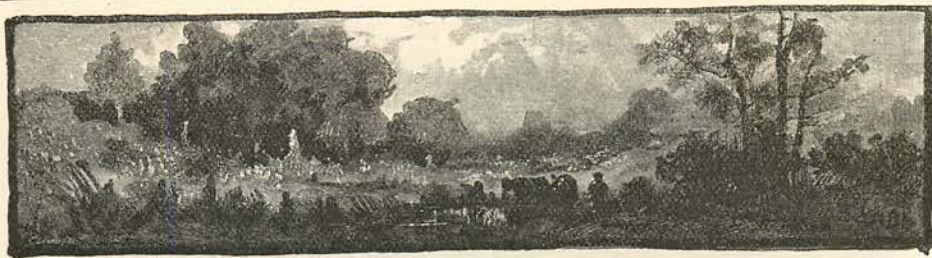
of her burrow, where she sputters and scolds with great ado.

Here, too, is the woodpecker's den in the dead tree close by, to which our red rover paid a well-remembered visit; but, contrary to his calculations, madam was at home, and met him at the door, and planted a pointed rebuke between his eyes that quite dispelled his appetite for the time being. He will never work that mine again. See how the mere thought of that pickaxe repeater speeds him on as he skips along and clears the bar posts at a jump!

But while this little athlete is at home on almost every fence, and trains a special gait for each, there are some of them that have no attractions for him. Such, for example, is the sawyer's fence. I do not remember ever having seen a squirrel on one of these fences. They offer him no continuity of track as in other fences, and as a foot-path the sawyer's fence practically comes to an end at every step. The progress of a squirrel on one of these fences would indeed be an amusing spectacle, for his course could be nothing but a series of bounds from the summits of the oblique slanting rails. If I were a squirrel, I think I should give a wide berth to the sawyer's fence, and I am inclined to the same lack of enthusiasm concerning it, even though I am not a squirrel, as any one would be who has traversed its length around a ten-acre lot in the vain hope of some assailable point of thoroughfare.

The sawyer's fence is the most exasperating member of the whole fence tribe, leading you on and on in a most persuading sort of way, baffling you at every attempt to make the breach, entangling your legs and clutching your garments in a manner most insinuating and humiliating; and as you beat a retreat to calm yourself and re-adjust matters a little, it stands there in defiance, and plainly seems to say, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" There is a secret spirit of antagonism in the sawyer's fence which, in its moments of rampage, is past all subjugation, and is a most absolute annihilator of true dignity.

But this eccentric champion is not without its good points. How hath it occasionally redeemed itself in ministering to the exigencies of life! In the rescue of that guileless youth, for instance, who returning home after dark one summer



THE STUMP LOT.

evening, fresh from a forbidden swim with the village boys, and who, in tripping innocently through the kitchen, was suddenly accosted by his mother, who would know, forsooth, "how that shirt came to be wrong side out." And he, being a mindful lad, and taking in the situation at a glance, replied: "Well, ain't that funny! Why, mother, I must 'a done that gettin' through the sawyer's fence up on the hill near grandpa's. I thort I felt sumthin' give;" and the fond mother folded him in her arms, and said he was a dutiful son, and that she never again would wrong him by unkind suspicion.

It is this same innocent that knows so well that spreading canopy of wild grape above the old stone wall, with its cozy retreat beneath, and the suggestive watermelon rinds that strew the ground.

It is his clear voice we hear in the evening dusk calling in pasture lot and lane. His is the pail that clinks along the road where dusty brambles droop and wait for him. His laugh has rung out high and merrily in concord with that creaking gate, and often have we heard his shout echoing among the din of barking dogs and clamor of the mob about its captive prisoner in the wall.

He has set sly snares in many a woody copse, and he knows the eggs of blackbird, oriole, and thrush. The brook-side knows him, and the yellow willow twigs yield bird-like music at his lips. He has seen the owl's nest in the hollow tree, the musk-rat's hut among the bogs, and the flashes from the gravelly river-bed to him are tell-tale gleams of silvery dace, of minnow, or of painted bream. He knows the speckled beauties too, but, alas! he knows them only on another's string. He has sought them with the fly, the cricket, and the worm, he has waded for them, and has frightened them from every gurgling nook that knew them. He has searched in vain

for those inexhaustible fishing grounds of Ethan Booth, the sly old village Nimrod, who drops in at the village store evening after evening with his long willow string laden with his day's haul of trout-flesh. But only Ethan knows their swimming grounds. If you chance upon him in your walks it is generally near some running brook, and you may rest assured that he has spotted you from afar, and has hidden his pole in the grass, while he fusses about the fence near by, adjusts a rail or two, or trims up the lay of the old stone wall, whistling the while he works, and when you come upon him he will start and say, "Lor', haow you scairt me!"

But there *was* a youth who proved too enterprising even for Ethan. He hung around the house, and followed Ethan afield as he stole out across lots at sunrise. He saw him take his fish-pole from its hiding-place along the fence, and trail it slyly through the weedy pasture lot. He tracked him for a mile upon the hillside, and at last shadowed him, and surprised him at his game, in the midst of his accumulating string of beauties that lay wriggling on their osier in the water. When at last that sudden yell rung out from among the weeds close by, our Nimrod almost toppled off his perch upon the cross-rail. Ethan was provoked, and showed it; but he took in the situation philosophically, and made the best of it.

"Say, Bub," he inquired, with a listless yawn that was ludicrous enough in contrast to his eager *qui vive* upon his perch only a moment previous, "wut time is't?"

"Well, it's about time to give *another* feller a show now, Ethan."

"Wa'al, yer kin hev it 'n' welcome for all me," replied he. "I'm jest about tuckered aout tryin' to work the old hole. I guess I'll be gittin' home, 'n' try the *river* agin. I might 'a *knowed* they wa'n't no pike in this 'ere puddle."



"Any luck, Ethan?"

"Luck? Wa'al, I cal'late yer wouldn't see me a-gittin' *about* o' here ef they wuz enny *luck*, I kin tell ye," answered he, twisting his line about his rod in preparation to depart.

"No luck, eh?" continues Bub. "What's that string of trout doing down there, then?"

"Whar?" exclaimed Nimrod, agape, and gazing everywhere upon the bank excepting at the right spot.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT.

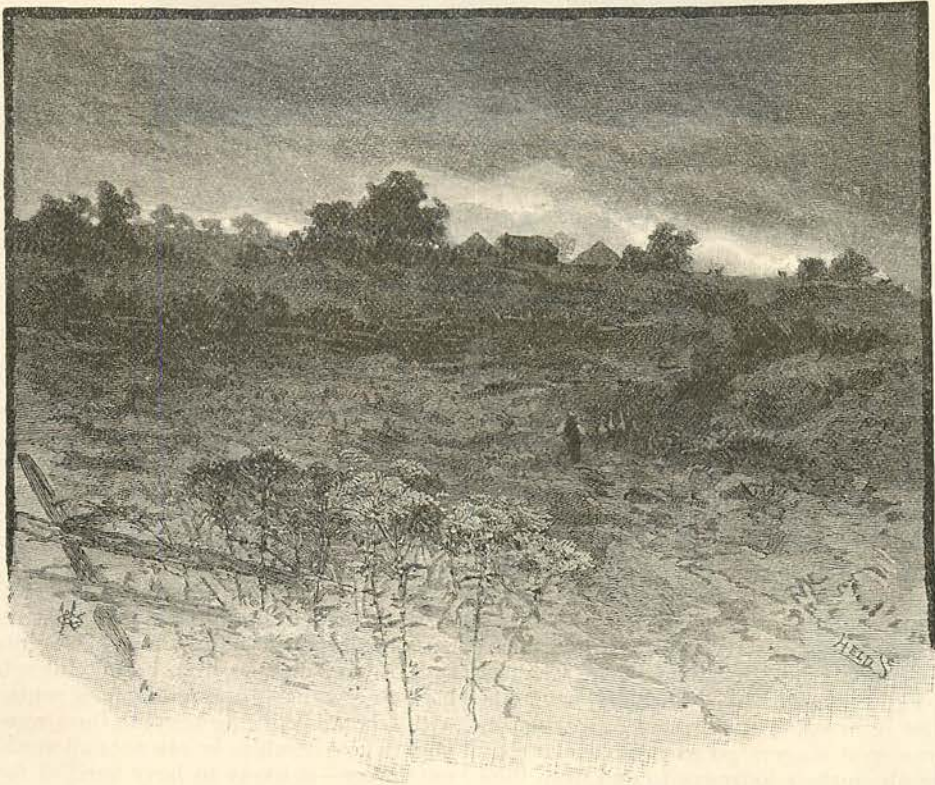
"Why, down there in the water."

"Oh, *them!* Oh, you took *them* for *traout*, did ye? Ha! ha! W'y, Bub, *them's* live bait. I'm fishin' for pickerel, 'n' I vaow they're pesky scarce. I b'lieve I'll go 'n' try the *river* agin."

For an hour or more Ethan had been thus monopolizing an important section of our squirrel's thoroughfare. It is the cross-pole of the water fence that spans the brook—a point whereon the squirrel and the halcyon meet on common ground. It is the chosen highway of our red rover to favorite hunting grounds beyond. At the opposite bank of the stream he follows the rail through a tangle of feathery willows, and up a steep incline beneath dark and sombre pines. Here he looks out ahead across a blue and hazy valley, with glistening lakes and silvery ribbons of winding streams, as he speeds along beneath the drooping boughs of mingled beeches and rock-maples. Now he is out again upon his zigzag course, past clearings with their blackened stumps and crimson fire-weed, through rocky weed-grown pasture-lands and fallows. There are a thousand pictures that come crowding as I follow his waving banner—peeps between those rails that will linger long after they have crumbled to earth. Here a low flat marsh, the haunt of the

heron, bristling with sedge and bulrush, and with thickset alders. There a placid lake, with softly tossing ripples among the floating lily-pads and eel-grass. Here a shelving bank, with mulleins and bleating sheep. Now a mumbling mill, with saffron-colored foam floating from its moss-grown wheel. There is a glimpse up hill, with its clang of geese—how doth memory serve to harmonize that discord!

Now we follow our little guide where he branches off along the flat-topped wall. See how he jumps among the woodbine, now dodging out of sight behind a copse of elders, or skipping beneath a bower of sumacs! Here he is lost beneath a covering screen of wild grape, and the startled birds fly out from their interrupted tipping from luscious vine clusters. Yonder he appears again upon the half-wall. At length he takes the rails, bounds along upon the hollow birchen pole, stops, turns, whisks his tail in a last adieu, and disappears. The old fence takes him to her heart again. His circuit is completed, and with it mine ends also.



LOOKING UP THE HILL.