

OCTOBER.—NUTTING IN THE WOODS.



Oft wandering by the woodland side  
 You hear the distant laughter sound ;  
 Or see the snow-white kirtles glide  
 Where the green hazels most abound :  
 All merry, noisy, nutters they,  
 Who through the 'tangling forests stray.—*The Country.*

ALL the wood-nuts gathered before the commencement of this month are worthless, when compared with those that still hang upon the hazels. Like ripe acorns, a jerk of the branch sends them dancing out of their vandyked cups, and they come tumbling down upon the moss, or silky forest-grass, like large dark brown beads, every one ripe, and almost ready to burst out of its shell, while each kernel is covered with a rich russet cloak.

As I last year entered, somewhat lengthily, into our country nutting excursions, I need only refer to the present engraving as illustrative of a scene before described. I have before dwelt upon the solemn associations awakened by the close of autumn. For although all its varied hues are beautiful to look upon, still it is a melancholy sight to witness the falling leaves; to see all that rendered summer so green and lovely, unhoused—drifted from their shady dwelling-places, leaving their old homes behind, naked and desolate; and wandering, as it were, houseless along the brown highways, over the wet and withered grass, or lying down to die in the wayside ditches. Who can walk abroad at such a season, without thinking of that change which must, in the end, take

place—without turning our thoughts to those who have gone before us, like companions who but set out earlier in the day, and gained the inn where we must all sleep, and retired to rest before we arrived?

In my "Year Book" I have described a forest scene, familiar to me from the days of my childhood; and as a railway is overthrowing these old wild-wood fastnesses, I shall transfer this picture of a spot that had stood unaltered for centuries, to the descriptive pages of this Almanack, conscious that I should but weaken my word-painting were I to alter my first sketch.

Acres of huge gorse bushes stretched to the very verge of this wild forest-land, many of them standing higher than the head of a tall man; while upon the edge of the woodland grew thousands of wild brambles, that had trailed over the low bushes, and formed a broad impenetrable hedge, so wide that several wag-gons, could the underwood have borne the weight, might have been driven over them abreast. This waste had never been cultivated since the dawning of creation. For miles around, there was no vestige of the hand of man. Here grew hawthorns so huge, old, grey, and weather-beaten, that they looked as if a score

of stems had been twisted into one, and become so hardened by time, that you might fancy they were bars of iron fused together so closely, that neither storm nor thunder had been able to rend them. Here and there uprose giant crab-trees, their gnarled and knotted stems overgrown with green and yellow moss, and long flaky lichens, which hung like ragged drapery from the boughs. Even the sun-stained fruit, when mellowed by the mists of October, was sour as vinegar. Some of the trunks were hollow and decayed; and looked like strange skeletons that had lived at a remote period of time, when man was not, so white, bleached, and monstrous were their forms; and from the decayed centre had, in some places, sprung up another tree, that waved green above the old desolation. Scattered at picturesque distances, we saw immense oaks, whose shadows stretched far and wide, and struck the mind with wonder, to behold such gigantic arms spread out with no other support than the iron body from which they sprang; while, to pace the length of a single bough, seemed like treading a long gallery. Many of these had, centuries ago, been struck by the thunder-bolt, or blackened by the red-armed lightning; yet lived on, in spite of the blaze which had burnt their branches and singed their ancient heads—standing like monuments that marked some old world which had, undated ages ago, passed away, and left the skeletons of those mighty giants to proclaim the bulk and vastness of that unrecorded era. And all around this wild and wooded wilderness of hoary trees, there extended a pathless waste of entangling under-wood, where the hazel and the hawthorn, the black bullace, and the armed sloe were blended, and matted, and twisted with the holly and the bramble and the prickly rose; while the woodbine climbed high over all, and, like a lady from her turret, looked out upon the wild and silent scene. It was only where the red fox, or the badger, or the daring hunter had forced a passage, that we were able to make our way along this bushy barrier. It recalled those graphic lines of Chaucer's, of a forest,

In which there dwelleth neither man nor beast,  
With knotty, knurly, barren trees old,  
Of stubby shape, and hideous to behold.

Above this vast covert of crooked branches, and spiked bushes, and trailing briars which seemed to have been struggling for ages for the mastery, there hovered scores of birds of prey—hawks of every species, dusky ravens, and horned owls that stared upon us from out the hollow trees at noon-day, and went sailing across the wild underwood, and between the ancient branches of the trees, like winged ghosts. And ever from the tangled thicket started some wild animal, the huge fox, or the grey badger, the savage wild cat, and the climbing marten; and we sometimes disturbed the stoat as he fed upon a young hare, or drove the weasel from his banquet, and picked up the ringdove, warm and bleeding, that he was feeding upon; or saw the fierce eyes of the polecat glaring upon us, as if wondering why we had disturbed his solitary dominions. Great hairy bats went gliding by in the twilight, with their leathery wings outspread; and black water-rats made a hollow sound, as they plunged into the forest brook, and were soon lost in the dark water, or among the black and rotten leaves. As I painted the same scene in verse, in my youthful years, I here present my readers with the other picture.

Majest'c grandeur stamp'd that solemn scene.  
For weary miles an outstretch'd forest lay,  
But seldom trod by aught of mortal man.  
Here nature sat enthroned in wild array,  
Profusely deck'd with thorns and witching bay.  
Here broad oaks threw afar their shady arms  
O'er creeping brambles that did wildly stray  
Around the trunks, where dark-leaved ivy swarms  
And none the ruddy squirrel 'mid its play alarms.

The sul'en crab-tree flourish'd 'neath the beech:  
Above, the sable pine did rear its head,  
As if the silver clouds it vain would reach  
So high these dark and branching boughs were spread  
The rattling cones wild winds profusely shed:  
Luxuriant box stood robed in gloomy hue,  
And cypress nodded o'er the glen's dark bed,  
Where stately ash o'ertopp'd the bow-famed yew—  
All burst in silent grandeur on th' astonish'd view.

The glens and glades, and dells were sprinkled round  
With healing herbs and variegated flowers,  
No bell or bud of which a lording owl'd  
No studied art bedeck'd those native bowers:  
There nature's rugged breast bared to the showers,  
Bore in its solitude the roses' bloom;  
Where high the woodbines rear their painted towers,  
There muscos violets 'mid the forest bloom  
Blossom and die, and blow again above the tomb.

No habitation grac'd that rugged scene,  
No pathway bore the track of man or steed;  
Dark trees those dells from scorching sunbeams screen,  
Where sharp-beak'd hawk and speckled songsters feed,  
And diving otters shake the tufted reed.  
No cultivation here smooth'd nature's face:  
Nor waving corn, nor hedge-enclosed mead,  
Across this savage scene the eye could trace:  
It stood as when the Cymri here did lead the chase.

It has no doubt struck many, during an autumn ramble, how slowly and almost imperceptibly the changes of the months take place. The seasons themselves are striking enough, but to watch the slow progress by which they reach the different land-marks of the year, is like tracing the movement of the hand of a watch around the dial's face. Take a home garden, for instance—the smaller the better for observation—and recal the time when the first scarlet runner, nasturtium, sweet pea, or convolvulus sprang up, each a tiny speck of green above the mould. For days and days you can scarcely perceive them increase; the two little leaves grow larger by degrees; and then other tiny buds shoot out; and you are lost, between noting the expansion of the first, and the slow advance of the latter. Time rolls on, and they begin to twine and flower, one here, another there; you marvel why the one is so early, and the other so late. The first flowers attract your attention the most, and when the whole row is hung with bloom, you are anxious to find the first pod. It is the many stages through which vegetation passes that confuse observation, that induce us to take so little note of time, that causes autumn to steal upon us almost unawares. It is the same with the lengthening and shortening of the days: we see the hours, and not the minutes—the rock, but not the coral insect that was instrumental in raising it.

Nor less wonderful is the departure of the birds—which we find alluded to in the Old Testament—a proof that the habits of these winged voyagers were the same three thousand years ago. For in the Book of Jeremiah it is written, that "The stork in the heavens knoweth her appointed times: and the turtle, and the crane, and the swallow observe the time of their coming." In Mr. Couch's interesting work on Animal Instinct, of which I have, more than once, made favourable mention, I find the following original observations on the migration of birds:—"The time of the withdrawal of the swallows and martens is more irregular than that of their coming, and begins with the swift, which usually

takes its flight in the first or second week of August—the whole colony disappearing at once—the actual departure being preceded, for a few days, by exercises in flying, which seem to be practising in sport what they soon expect seriously to execute. They may be witnessed ascending in a spiral manner, and in very close phalanx, with even more than their usual rapidity, to a very great height; and having two or three times executed this movement, they suddenly sink down to their nests, after which, till the next day, they are no more to be seen. A remark often made—that the swallow tribe go away earliest in the warmest seasons—appears to be correct; but whether there be any physiological reason for this, is a matter of doubt. The principal cause of their early readiness for migration seems to be, that less interruption has been thrown in the way of the formation of the nest; and that there has been a greater abundance of insect food for the support of the young, which has accelerated their growth. In an unfavourable season in these respects, or when other causes have occurred to retard the maturity of the brood, the birds have not only been kept later, but in many instances the migratory instinct has grown sufficiently strong to overcome the force of parental affection, and the brood has been left to perish in the nest. To attend on a helpless young one, a single swift has been known to remain for a fortnight after the departure of its companions; and it is a frequent occurrence for the swallow to leave its brood to perish in the nest. As autumn approaches the swallows return to their nests, only for the sake of sleep, or as a convenient resting-place; and about the middle of September, after having shown their social disposition by assembling in companies, the earliest of them enter upon their autumnal migration, for which the proper season is the month of October. The flight to their winter's destination is less direct than their coming; so that it is not uncommon for small parties to appear again, long after they have seemed to have left us. Such is frequently the case in November."

The golden woodpecker laughs loud no more;  
The pye no longer prates; no longer scolds  
The saucy jay: Who sees the goldfinch now  
The feather'd groundsel pluck, or hears him sing  
In bower of apple blossoms perch'd? Who sees  
The chimney-haunting swallow skim the pool,  
And quietly dip, or hears his early song  
Twitter'd to dawning day. All, all are hush'd.—HERDIS.

I have before pointed out the beautiful days that often come with the close of October: the fine blue middle-tint that hangs over the landscape is never seen to greater perfection in England than at this season of the year, when the weather is settled.

Those who love to ramble in the country will find as much amusement and instruction now, as they did in the midst of summer. For many a lovely nook, then hidden by masses of foliage, will now break in new beauty upon the eye. Weeds and flowers have run into seed; and great is the variety of forms they have assumed in this new stage of existence. Urn, and cup, and bell, and ball, and vessels of almost every shape, stand laden with the flowers of another summer; and but wait for the strong winds to blow open the doors of their garner, that they may scatter their seeds upon the earth. But these will soon pass away, and then, instead of the faded foliage of autumn, we shall see the hedges shorn of their withered leaves, and all bare and naked, saving where they are hung with hips and haws, or where the bright holly and the dark-leaved ivy throw over them a patch of green. We shall soon hear the wind howling about the house at night, like a hungry wolf, and trying the doors and window shutters, as if determined to enter; but finding no way there, getting into the chimney, and there bellowing, and moaning, and growling, as if it stuck fast. And while we listen to such sounds, we shall recal the darkness that reigns over the sea: the ships that are driven like autumn leaves before the mighty storm, of shoals, and sand, and wrecks, and huge promontories lashed by the mountainous waves, that roll away, and go moaning along the beaten beach, as if hungry for their prey. We shall think of desolate moors, and lonely roads, and solitary toll-gates that stand on the edges of treeless commons, or between the wild sweep of lonesome woods where groaning branches ever utter deep dolorous sounds, as if moaning for very pain—places where travellers have been way-laid, and where gibbet-posts stand, whose irons ever swing and creak. Spots that have—

A weird-like and dreary look,  
As, if murder lurk'd anywhere, there it would be:  
Ruinous, shadowy, fearsome, and lone,  
Abounding with whispers that seem not its own,  
Where sounds, not of earth, shake each grey old ash tree.

