

## NOVEMBER.—FIRESIDE LIFE.



To an habitual student of the fair face of Nature, it would seem a matter of no great difficulty, to detect in the varying expression of her countenance, the footsteps of time, as it silently trends onward, from one division of each annual circle to another. And not less distinctly may the close observer of our busy human life, trace its progress in the social peculiarities of the various months of the year. They present to our notice not alone the broad contrasts bearing relation to the important changes in nature from season to season, but also the same minute distinctions, which would, to the perceptions of many, render an October landscape quite distinguishable from the same scene beheld in November. Writers far better versed in the subject than ourselves, having gracefully spoken of the perpetual, though delicate transitions in nature, there are left us for discussion only the passing characteristics of social existence, and it is in its November phase especially, that we would now touch upon it.

England has always been acknowledged as the only country which can boast a fireside life; no imitations of it have flourished or matured elsewhere, for it is a concomitant of our abused climate, our national love of seclusion, and preference of comfort to gaiety. England then is the country, and November the especial season for quiet domestic enjoyment.

It is a tantalizing thing to a passer-by who may himself have miles to traverse before his bourne is reached, and no anticipation, perhaps, of any particular domestic pleasure when he does reach it, to follow the eager rapid footsteps of some complacent member of society; to see him stop with a smile full of self-gratulation at the door of a prosperous-looking mansion, and obtain admittance before he has had time to demand it, through the instrumentality of a "wee thing," who has been flattening her face for an hour against the window pane, that she might give the earliest notice of "Papa's arrival." It must be acknowledged that, under all the circumstances, it is a trying thing, to catch a passing glimpse of a well-lighted hall, and to see the glowing reflection of a blazing fire lighting up the form and features of the graceful "house mother," as she emerges from the dining-room to assist the rest of the household, in anticipating the wants and wishes of the master. And doubly irritating is it to the casual observer, when this little outline of domestic life has been by chance revealed to him, to have the curtain dropped before it, and to be mentally driven out like an intruder, as he is, from this most pleasant of life's "pleasant places."

But why should we, in our ethereal character of author, submit to the conventional restrictions which must limit the observations and disappoint the curiosity of the material looker on? Why not enter silently some tempting homestead, take our seat in some unoccupied nook, and note down truthfully all the little details, however prosaic in themselves, which make up the sum of this fireside enjoyment? It is true we have all some acquaintance with it, but then it wears not the same face for everyone.

In one of the older suburbs of London, there is a pleasant open road leading remotely to the country, and more nearly to nursery gardens, turnip fields, and such semi-rural delights. Here has sprung up, within the last few years, a row of about a dozen white cottages, so small that each one seems to occupy no more than the space of one moderate-sized room, and yet embellished with many little external refinements which elevate their character, and seem to claim respect for their inmates. One there is, at the extreme end, which decidedly bears away the palm from its competitors, less by any superior grandeur of adornment than by trifling tokens of care and taste. No vivid representations of Crystal Palaces or Gothic castles, which, in the shape of blinds, appear so very popular in the vicinity, have found admission here; the green Venetian ones which supply their place form quite a refreshment to the eye, wearied with the gay diversity to be met with in the row. Neither are there any elaborate curtains, giving evidence of mere thought and labour devoted to their construction than to their cleanliness, to be perceived here; some plain muslin drapery of snowy whiteness serves to relieve the seasonable crimson damask, and to overshadow the arched window of the sitting-room. A few half-hardy plants adorn the window sill, and the few feet of garden ground, arranged as a miniature lawn, presents at this particular season a far more cheerful aspect than the ambitious flower-plots of the neighbouring territories. All looks so fresh, clean, and pretty, that as we gaze we become insensibly interested in the occupants.

It is about half-past four in the afternoon, but the day has been clear for November, and it is not yet dark; nevertheless, preparations are actively making in the little parlour, some twelve feet square, for the evening's comfort. A feminine form, attired in a close-fitting dress of dark merino, and looking as

trim and compact as could possibly be desired, is busily flitting about hither and thither. She is a bright, fresh-looking, damsel, we should say—but that a wedding-ring on her finger, and a small piece of lace, which she no doubt entitles a cap, ornamenting her brown hair, bespeak for her a due meed of respect as a matron. It would be useless to attempt a full and particular description of her personal appearance, whilst she is rushing in and out of the adjoining kitchen every moment; herself executing the voluminous directions about domestic matters, which pour forth from her lips, ostensibly for the benefit of the little maid some four feet high, who in her own small person evidently constitutes the whole retinue of the establishment. After a succession of journeymen to and fro, and many a merry concussion between the mistress and her equally zealous assistant, the tea-table is spread in genuine country fashion. On the white cloth may be observed more than one substantial luxury, which confirms our half-formed impression that the mistress of the house is a farmer's daughter, and lead to the belief that her thoughtful mother has not rendered the arrival of a hamper of good things dependent on that of the Christmas season. Undoubtedly that goodly ham, rich honey, and crusty home-made loaf, do present a very agreeable *tout ensemble*. No wonder the presiding deity surveys it so often with a well-pleased smile, always remembering, as she does so, some omission to repair, or suggesting to herself an alteration, which may be an improvement in the aspect of things. By the time this department of the preparations is quite perfect, darkness has closed in; so now the curtains have to be let down and arranged, a matter requiring both time and attention to accomplish satisfactorily; for an attention to the beautiful, either for its own sake or for that of some one else who loves it, is evidently present here, and finds entrance into every detail. Finally, the comfortable cushioned Derby chair is drawn up to an angle between the fire and table—though not for herself. The chimney-piece receives a final arrangement, and a small plaster statuette, apparently a new acquisition, is produced, uncovered, and disposed to the best advantage on the mahogany chiffonier, where it has a row of neatly-bound cheap books for a background. The lamp is ready to be lighted at a moment's notice, the fire promises to blaze forth at a touch, and, without undoing, nothing more can be found to do. She, therefore, takes up a half-finished collar, and, by the slender illumination of a single candle, works with nimble fingers but divided attention; for her every look and gesture tell of restlessness and anticipation. Her happiness, in common with the various comforts around, is to rise to full maturity only at some expected signal, for which we begin to feel almost as anxious as herself. The first symptom that our wishes are in a fair way to be gratified, is a hasty movement on the part of the young wife; she has received some mystic warning, and the grand illumination is accomplished before the swing of the little iron gate announces to our duller faculties that footsteps approach. The door is opened before the gravel path is half-traversed, and now will that cold pedestrian, whose unhappy case we imagine, obtain, if he happen to be passing, a view of an interior which will not tend to place him on better terms with the external world.

It is needless for us to intrude on the proceedings which are taking place in the passage, or to note all that goes on there. Sufficient is it to remark an honest manly voice (a trifle louder, perhaps, than might be approved in the best society), giving assurance in answer to many inquiries, that "he cannot possibly be wet, as it has not rained all day," and also replying dutifully to a minute examination touching a certain cold, which, it appeared, is under domestic treatment. Meantime the old coat and slippers have been donned, and the sacred Derby chair is at last worthily filled by the master of the house, whose appearance fully answers to the frank and sensible tones of his voice. No sooner is he seated, then the fire receives a supplementary stir, and glows and blazes as if to do honour to the real commencement of this day's fireside life.

Now is the mistress again full of active happy cares, making the tea, and overlooking some little hot viand preparing in the kitchen. She has scarcely time to give more than an occasional smile in acknowledgment of the quiet loving glance with which the husband's eyes follow her every movement. But soon all is ready; the table is pushed close to him—for he is ordered to move at his peril—and she places herself near him, where he can see her; for she knows, as we do, that her pleasant genial face is the best refreshment for him. The young couple have now both leisure and inclination to talk, and we may thus chance to gather up a few crumbs of information about their sphere in life. Judging from the quantity of news which is mutually related, it must have been a day unusually fruitful of events. First of all, "Willie," on his way to the brewery, where he is junior clerk at a salary of seventy pounds a year, had encountered an old school-fellow, just returned from sea, brim full of adventures and enthusiasm for his old friends. They had not time to talk much, so he is to pass the day with them on the morrow, which will be Sunday. The assurance with which this invitation is communicated by its author, and the placidity with which the tidings are received, disturbed only by slight regrets that there are no greens in the house, speaks well for the good understanding existing between the two. Catherine is thoughtful for a minute or two; but her difficulties, if such they be, seem quickly solved, and she is quite ready to listen to the particulars of an interview between her husband and the "Senior Partner"—a magnate to them of no mean importance. He has spoken approvingly of the manner in which Willie's duties are performed (we are perforce familiar), and alluded to advancement both in position and salary as no very remote prospect. When this pleasant theme is exhausted, it becomes Catherine's turn to relate the events of her day. The first was a letter from her country-home, insisting on a brief visit from them at Christmas, which is at once resolved on, if the ways and means can be devised with prudence. From this subject they wander off to the days of their courtship, and the various walks and talks which secure for the farm and its vicinity a place in their affections only second to their own little home. All this is pleasant enough to listen to, but would lose in the repetition; and, besides, we must not forget that the evening is wearing on apace. "Willie's" attention is just now arrested by that specimen of the fine arts on the chiffonier; and whilst he looks and admires, its history is unfolded. Catherine reminds him of certain small sums of money which he has bestowed upon her at different times, for the purchase of some personal luxury, the selection of which was intended to lure her away from home and the everlasting embroidery, as he calls it: here is the result of the aggregate amount. The reader, by the way, has heard a good deal of this same embroidery, and must be informed that a little private fund is accumulating by its means, which, we suspect, will be spent in the Christmas trip. Willie is a little jealous of his wife's exertions, but she is smilingly obstinate; and, on the present occasion, is so resolutely industrious, that he takes from the shelf a volume of a standard work, opens at the mark, and, drawing the lamp a little nearer, begins reading aloud according to his usual custom. They have both become so thoroughly interested and absorbed, that there is little prospect of seeing any further variation in their pleasures this evening; and, although we would gladly linger near them, it is time to bid an affectionate, though silent adieu, for our present object is attained. We have become acquainted with the fireside life of one English home; and, although all may not be so calm and peaceful—and even into this one trouble will erewhile enter—it is as certain that the dark side of every lot has its bright reverse, as that gloomy November has its own share of compensatory pleasures.