

## THE OLD OAK OF ANDOVER.

### A REVERY.

Silently, with dreamy languor, the fleecy snow is falling. Through the windows, flowery with blossoming geranium and heliotrope, through the downward sweep of crimson and muslin curtain, one watches it as the wind whirls and sways it in swift eddies.

Right opposite our house, on our Mount Clear, is an old oak, the apostle of the primeval forest. Once, when this place was all wildwood, the man who was seeking a spot for the location of the buildings of Phillips Academy climbed this oak, using it as a sort of green watchtower, from whence he might gain a view of the surrounding country. Age and time, since then, have dealt hardly with the stanch old fellow. His limbs have been here and there shattered; his back begins to look mossy and dilapidated; but after all, there is a piquant, decided air about him, that speaks the old age of a tree of distinction, a kingly oak. To-day I see him standing, dimly revealed through the mist of falling snows; to-morrow's sun will show the outline of his gnarled limbs--all rose color with their soft snow burden; and again a few months, and spring will breathe on him, and he will draw a long breath, and break out once more, for the three hundredth time, perhaps, into a vernal crown of leaves. I sometimes think that leaves are the thoughts of trees, and that if we only knew it, we should find their life's experience recorded

in them. Our oak! what a crop of meditations and remembrances must he have thrown forth, leafing out century after century. Awhile he spake and thought only of red deer and Indians; of the trillium that opened its white triangle in his shade; of the scented arbutus, fair as the pink ocean shell, weaving her fragrant mats in the moss at his feet; of feathery ferns, casting their silent shadows on the checkerberry leaves, and all those sweet, wild, nameless, half-mossy things, that live in the gloom of forests, and are only desecrated when brought to scientific light, laid out and stretched on a botanic bier. Sweet old forest days!--when blue jay, and yellow hammer, and bobalink made his leaves merry, and summer was a long opera of such music as Mozart dimly dreamed. But then came human kind bustling beneath; wondering, fussing, exploring, measuring, treading down flowers, cutting down trees, scaring bobalinks--and Andover, as men say, began to be settled.

Staunch men were they--these Puritan fathers of Andover. The old oak must have felt them something akin to himself. Such strong, wrestling limbs had they, so gnarled and knotted were they, yet so outbursting with a green and vernal crown, yearly springing, of noble and generous thoughts, rustling with leaves which shall be for the healing of nations.

These men were content with the hard, dry crust for themselves, that they might sow seeds of abundant food for us, their children; men out of whose hardness in enduring we gain leisure to be soft and graceful, through whose poverty we have become rich. Like Moses, they had for

their portion only the pain and weariness of the wilderness, leaving to us the fruition of the promised land. Let us cherish for their sake the old oak, beautiful in its age as the broken statue of some antique wrestler, brown with time, yet glorious in its suggestion of past achievement.

I think all this the more that I have recently come across the following passage in one of our religious papers. The writer expresses a kind of sentiment which one meets very often upon this subject, and leads one to wonder what glamour could have fallen on the minds of any of the descendants of the Puritans, that they should cast nettles on those honored graves where they should be proud to cast their laurels.

"It is hard," he says, "for a lover of the beautiful--not a mere lover, but a believer in its divinity also--to forgive the Puritans, or to think charitably of them. It is hard for him to keep Forefathers' Day, or to subscribe to the Plymouth Monument; hard to look fairly at what they did, with the memory of what they destroyed rising up to choke thankfulness; for they were as one-sided and narrow-minded a set of men as ever lived, and saw one of Truth's faces only--the hard, stern, practical face, without loveliness, without beauty, and only half dear to God. The Puritan flew in the face of facts, not because he saw them and disliked them, but because he did not see them. He saw foolishness, lying, stealing, worldliness--the very mammon of unrighteousness rioting in the world and bearing sway--and he ran full tilt against the monster, hating it with a very mortal and mundane hatred, and anxious to see it

bite the dust that his own horn might be exalted. It was in truth only another horn of the old dilemma, tossing and goring grace and beauty, and all the loveliness of life, as if they were the enemies instead of the sure friends of God and man."

Now, to those who say this we must ask the question with which Socrates of old pursued the sophist: What is beauty? If beauty be only physical, if it appeal only to the senses, if it be only an enchantment of graceful forms, sweet sounds, then indeed there might be something of truth in this sweeping declaration that the Puritan spirit is the enemy of beauty.

The very root and foundation of all artistic inquiry lies here. What is beauty? And to this question God forbid that we Christians should give a narrower answer than Plato gave in the old times before Christ arose, for he directs the aspirant who would discover the beautiful to "consider of greater value the beauty existing in the soul, than that existing in the body." More gracefully he teaches the same doctrine when he tells us that "there are two kinds of Venus, (beauty;) the one, the elder, who had no mother, and was the daughter of Uranus, (heaven,) whom we name the celestial; the other, younger, daughter of Jupiter and Dione, whom we call the vulgar."

Now, if disinterestedness, faith, patience, piety, have a beauty celestial and divine, then were our fathers worshippers of the beautiful. If high-mindedness and spotless honor are beautiful things,

they had those. What work of art can compare with a lofty and heroic life? Is it not better to be a Moses than to be a Michael Angelo making statues of Moses? Is not the life of Paul a sublimer work of art than Raphael's cartoons? Are not the patience, the faith, the undying love of Mary by the cross, more beautiful than all the Madonna paintings in the world. If, then, we would speak truly of our fathers, we should say that, having their minds fixed on that celestial beauty of which Plato speaks, they held in slight esteem that more common and earthly.

Should we continue the parable in Plato's manner, we might say that the earthly and visible Venus, the outward grace of art and nature, was ordained of God as a priestess, through whom men were to gain access to the divine, invisible One; but that men, in their blindness, ever worship the priestess instead of the divinity.

Therefore it is that great reformers so often must break the shrines and temples of the physical and earthly beauty, when they seek to draw men upward to that which is high and divine.

Christ says of John the Baptist, "What went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold they which are clothed in soft raiment are in kings' palaces." So was it when our fathers came here. There were enough wearing soft raiment and dwelling in kings' palaces. Life in papal Rome and prelatic England was weighed down with blossoming luxury. There were abundance of people to think of pictures, and statues, and

gems, and cameos, vases and marbles, and all manner of deliciousness. The world was all drunk with the enchantments of the lower Venus, and it was needful that these men should come, Baptist-like in the wilderness, in raiment of camel's hair. We need such men now. Art, they tell us, is waking in America; a love of the beautiful is beginning to unfold its wings; but what kind of art, and what kind of beauty? Are we to fill our houses with pictures and gems, and to see that even our drinking cup and vase is wrought in graceful pattern, and to lose our reverence for self-denial, honor, and faith?

Is our Venus to be the frail, insnaring Aphrodite, or the starry, divine Urania?