

Literature, &c.

THE SPIRIT OF THE MAGAZINES.

THE WINTERS.

BY FRANCES BROWNE.

We did not fear them once—the dull, gray mornings

No cheerless burden on our spirits laid;
The long night-watches did not bring us warnings

That we were tenants of a house decayed;
The early snows like dreams to us descended;

The frost did fairy-work on pave and bough;
Beauty, and power, and wonder have not ended—

How is it that we fear the winters now?

Their house-fires fall as bright on earth and chambers;

Their northern starlight shines as coldly clear;

The woods still keep their holly for December;

The world a welcome yet for the new year.

And far away in old remembered places

The snow-drop rises and the robin sings;

The sun and moon look out with loving faces—

Why have our days forgot such goodly things?

Is it now that north winds find us shaken

By tempests fiercer than its bitter blast,

Which fair beliefs and friendships, too, have taken

Away like summer foliage as they passed,

And made life leafless in its pleasant valleys,

Waning the light of promise from our day—

Fell mists meet even in the inward palace—

A dimness not like theirs to pass away!

It was not thus when dreams of love and laurels

Gave sunshine to the winters of our youth,

Before its hopes had fallen in fortune's quarrels,

Or time had bowed them with his heavy truth—

Ere yet the twilights found us strange and lenely,

With shadows coming when the fire burns low,

To tell of distant graves and losses only—

The past that cannot change and will not go.

Alas! dear friends, the winter is within us,

Hard is the ice that grows about the heart;

For petty cares and vain regrets have won us

From life's true heritage and better part.

Seasons, and skies rejoice, yea, worship rather;

But nations toil and tremble even as we,

Hoping for harvest they will never gather,

Fearing the winters which they may not see.

From Household Words.

LOST ALICE.

WHY did I marry her? I often asked myself the question in the days that succeeded our honeymoon. By right, I should have married no one. Yet I loved her, as I love her still.

She was, perhaps, the strangest character of her age. In her girlhood I could not comprehend her; and I often think, when I raise my eyes to her grave, quiet face, as she sits opposite me at dinner, that I do not comprehend her yet. There are many thoughts working in her brain of which I know nothing, and flashes of feeling look out at her eyes now and then, and go back again, as captives might steal a glimpse of the outer world through their prison bars, and turn to their brick walled solitude once more. She is my wife. I have her and hold her as no other can. She bears my name, and sits at the head of my table; she rides beside me in my carriage, or takes my arm as we walk; and yet I know and feel, all the time, that the darling of my past has fled from me for ever, and that it is only the ghost of the gay Alice, whom I won in all the bloom of her bright youth, that lingers near me now.

She was not a child when I married her, though she was very young. I mean, that life had taught her lessons which are generally given only to the grey-haired, and had laid burdens upon her which belong of right to the old. She had been an unloved child, and at the age of sixteen she was left to herself, and entirely dependent on her own exertions. Friends and family she had none, so she was accustomed laughingly to say; but I have since found that her sisters were living, and in happy homes, even at the time when she accepted that awful trust of herself, and went out into the great world to fulfil it. Of this part of her life she never speaks; but one who knew her then has told me much. It was a time of struggle and pain, as well it might have been. Fresh from the life of a large boarding school, she was little fitted for the bustle of a great selfish city; and the tears come to my eyes as I think, with a kind of wonder on the child who pushed her way through difficulties at which strong men have quailed, and made herself a name, and a position, and a home. She was a writer; at first a drudge for the weekly press, poorly paid, and

unappreciated. By and bye, brighter days dawned, and the wolf went away from the door. She was admired, read sought after, and above all—paid. Even then, she could not use the wisdom she had purchased at so dear a rate. She held her heart in her hand, and it was wrung and tortured every day.

'I may as well stop breathing as stop loving,' she would say, with a happy smile. Don't talk to me about my folly. Let me go on with my toys; and, if they break in my hand, you cannot help it, and I shall not come to you for sympathy.'

She was not beautiful; but something—whether it was her bright, happy face, or the restless gaiety of her manner—bewitched people, and made them like her. Men did the maddest things imaginable for her sake; and not only young men in whom folly was pardonable, but those who should have been too wise to be caught by the sparkle of her smile, or the gay ringing of her laugh. She did not trust them; her early life had taught her better; but I think she liked them for awhile, till some newer fancy came, and then she danced past them, and was gone.

It was in the country that I met her first; and there she was more herself than in the city. We were distant relatives, though we had never seen each other, and the Fates sent me to spend my summer vacation with my mother's aunt, in a country village, where she was already domesticated. Had I known this, I should have kept my distance; for it was only a fourteenth or fifteenth cousinship that lay between us, and I had a kind of horror of her. I hardly knew why. I was a steady-going, quiet sort of a lawyer, and hated to have my short holiday of rest and quiet broken in upon by a fine lady. I said as much to my aunt, in return for her announcement of 'Alice Kent is here,' with which she greeted me. She looked over her spectacles in quiet wonder, as I gave her a slight sketch of the lady's city life, as I had had it from the lips of 'Mrs Grundy' herself.

'Well—live and learn!' they say. But who ever would think it was our Alice you are talking of, Frank! However, I'll say no more about her! You'll have plenty of time to get acquainted with her in the month you mean to pass here. And we are glad to see you, and your bed-room is ready—the one you used to like.

I took up my hat, and strolled away to have a look at the farm. By-and-by I got over the orchard wall, and crossed the brook, and the high road, and went out into the grove behind the house, whose farthest trees were growing on the side of the hill which looked so blue and distant from my chamber window. It was an old favorite place of mine. A broad wagon track led through the woods, out to a clearing on the other side, where was a little sheet of water, called 'The Fairy's Looking-glass,' and a beautiful view of a lovely country, with the steep green hills lying down in the distance, wrapped in a soft fleecy mantle of cloud and haze. I could think of nothing, when I stood there, on a fine sunny day, but the long gaze of Bunyan's Pilgrim through the shepherd's glass, at the beautiful city towards which he was journeying. And it also seemed sometimes as if I could wander 'over the hills and far away,' and lose myself in one of the fair valleys at the foot of those hills, and be content never to come out and face the weary world any more.

I walked slowly through the woods, with the sunshine falling through the green leaves of the young beeches in chequered radiance on my path, drawing in long breaths of the fresh air, and feeling a tingling in my veins and a glow at my heart, as if the blood were flowing newly there, until I came to the little circular grove of pines and hemlocks that led out upon the Fairy's Looking-glass. Something stirred as I pierced my way through the branches, and I heard a low growl.

A girl was half-sitting, half-lying in the sunshine beside the little lake, throwing pebbles into the water, and watching the ripples that spread and widened to the other shore. A great black Newfoundland dog was standing between me and her, showing a formidable row of strong white teeth, and looked me threateningly in the face.

She started, looked sharply round, and saw me standing in the little grove with the dog between us. She burst out laughing.

I felt that I was cutting rather a ridiculous figure, but I put a bold face upon the matter, and asked coolly,

'Are you Alice Kent?'

'People call me so.'

'Then I suppose I may call you cousin, for I am Frank Atherton?'

'Cousin Frank! We have been expecting you this week. When did you come?'

'Just now.'

She made room for me beside her. We talked along, about our family, our mutual friends, and the old homestead of the Athertons, which she had seen, though I had not. She told me about the house, and our cousins who were then living there, and I sat listening, looking now and then at her, as she sat with the sunshine falling around her, and the great dog lying at her feet. I wondered, almost as my aunt had done, if this was indeed the Alice Kent of whom I had heard so much. She was dressed plainly, very plainly in a kind of gray

material, that fell around her in light soft folds. A knot of plain blue ribbon fastened her linen collar, and a gipsy hat, lying beside her, was trimmed with the same color. Her watch chain, like a thread of gold, and a diamond ring, were the only ornaments she wore. Yet I had never seen a dress I liked so well. She was tall (too tall, I should have said, had she been any one else; for, when we were standing, her head was almost on a level with mine) and slender, and quick and agile in all her movements. Her brown hair was soft and pretty, but she wore it carelessly pushed away from her forehead, not arranged with that nicety I should have expected in a city belle. Her features were irregular, full of life and spirit, but decidedly plain; her complexion fair, her mouth rather large, frank and smiling, her eyebrows arched, as if they were asking questions; and her eyes large, and of a soft dark grey, very pleasant to look into, very puzzling, too, as I found afterwards to my cost. Those eyes were the only beauty she possessed, and she unconsciously made the most of them. Had she been a Carmelite nun, she would have talked with them: she could not have helped it. When they laughed, it seemed their normal state—the bright beaming glance they gave; but, when they darkened suddenly and grew softer and deeper, and looked up into the face of any unfortunate wight with an expression peculiar to themselves, heaven help him.

Though I had known her only five minutes, I felt this, when I chanced to look up and meet a curious glance she had fixed on me. She had ceased to talk, and was sitting, with her lips half apart and a lovely color mantling on her cheeks, studying my face intently, when our eyes met. There was an electric kind of shock in the gaze. I saw the color deepen and go up to her forehead, and a shiver ran over me from head to foot. It was dangerous for me to watch that blush, but I did; and I longed to know its cause, and wondered what thought had brought it.

'Fred, bring me my hat,' she said to her dog, affecting to yawn. 'It is time for us to go home to supper, I suppose. Are you hungry, cousin Frank?'

'Yes—no,' I answered, with my thoughts still running on that blush.

She laughed good naturedly, and took the hat from the Newfoundland, who had brought it in his mouth.

'How fond you are of that great dog,' I said, as we rose from our seat beneath the tree.

'Fond of him?' She stooped down over him with a sudden impetuous movement, took his head between her two hands, and kissed the beauty spot on his forehead. 'Fond of him, cousin Frank? Why, the dog is my idol! He is the only thing on earth who is or has been true to me, and the only thing—' She stopped short, and colored.

'That you have been true to,' I said finishing the sentence for her.

'So people say,' she answered with a laugh. 'But look at him—look at those beautiful eyes, and tell me if any one could help loving him. My poor old Fred! So honest in this weary world.'

She sighed and patted his head again, and he stood wagging his tale and looking up into her face, with eyes that were as she had said, beautiful, and what was better far, brimful of love and honesty.

'I doubt if you will keep pace with us,' she said, after we had walked a few steps; and Fred is longing for a race. I always give him one through the woods. Would you mind? Oh dear, no!

The next moment she was off like the wind, and the dog tearing after her, barking till the woods rang again. I saw her that night no more.

I was, as I have already said, a grave, steady-going lawyer, verging towards a respectable middle age, with one or two gray hairs showing among my black locks. I had had my dreams and fancies, and my hot, eager, generous youth, like most other men; and they had passed away. But one thing I had not known, one thing I had missed (save in my dreams) and that was a woman's love.

If I ever gave my visions a body and a name, they were totally unlike all the realities I had ever seen. The wife of my freshest reveries was a slight, delicate, gentle creature, with a pure pale face, sweet lips, the bluest and clearest of eyes, the softest and finest of golden hair, and a voice low and sweet, like the murmurings of an Aeolian harp. And she sat by my chair in silence; loving me always, but loving me silently, and her name was Mary. I dare say, if I had met the original of this placid picture in life, I should have wooed and won her, and have been utterly miserable.

So as a matter of course, I fell into danger now. When Alice Kent went singing and dancing through the house, leaving every door and window open as she went, I used often to lay down my pen and look after her and feel as if the sun shone brighter for her being there. When she raced through the grove or orchard with the great dog at her heels, I smiled, and patted Fred on the head; when she rode past the house at a hand gallop on her gray pony, Fra Diavolo, and leaped him over the garden gate and shook her whip sanely in my face, I laid aside my book, to admire her riding, and never thought her unwomanly or ungraceful.

'We grew to be great friends—like brother and sister. I used to say to myself. How that liking glided gradually into loving, I could not have told. I met her one day in the village street. I turned a corner, and came upon her suddenly. She was walking slowly along, with her dog beside her, and her eyes fixed upon the ground, looking graver and more thoughtful than I had ever seen her before. At sight of me her whole face brightened suddenly; yet she passed me with a nod and a smile, and took her way towards home. Seeing that flash of light play over her grave face, and feeling the sudden bound with which my heart sprang up to meet it, I knew what we were to each other.

It was late when I reached home, after a musing walk. The farmer and his wife had gone to bed, the children were at a merry-making at the next house, and a solitary light burned from the parlor window, which was open. The full moon shone fairly in a sky without a cloud. I unfastened the gate and went in; and there in the open door sat Alice, with a light shawl thrown over her shoulders, her head resting on the shaggy coat of the Newfoundland dog. His beautiful brown eyes watched me as I came up the path, but he did not stir.

I sat down near her: but on the lower step so that I could see her face.

'Alice, you do not look well.'

'But I am. Quite well. I am going away to-morrow.'

'Going away! Where?'

'Home. To London. Well? What ails you, cousin Frank? Did you never hear of any one going to London before?'

'Yes; but why do you go?'

'Why?' She opened her eyes and looked at me. 'For many reasons. Firstly, I only came for six weeks, and I have stayed nearly three months; secondly, because I have business which can be put off no longer; and thirdly, because my friends are wondering what on earth keeps me here so long. (They will say soon, it is you, Frank.) They vow they cannot do without me any longer, and it is pleasant to be missed, you know.'

'And so you are going back to the old life, Alice? And by-and-by I suppose you will marry?'

I would not advise any man, be he old or young, in case he does not think it wise or prudent to marry the woman he loves, to linger with her in the doorway of a silent farmhouse, and hold her hand, and look out upon a moonlight night. The touch of the small light fingers was playing the mischief with my good resolutions, and my wisdom (if I had any!)

'Alice,' I said softly; and I almost started as she did at the sound of my own voice, it was so changed. 'Alice, we have been very happy here.'

'Very.'

I took both her hands and held them close in mine. But she would not look at me, though her face was turned that way.

'There is a great difference between us, dear Alice. I am much older than you, and much graver. I have never loved any woman but you in my life, while you have charmed a thousand hearts, and had a thousand fancies. If you were what the world thinks you, and what you try to make yourself out to be, I should say no more than this—I love you. But I know you have a heart. I know you can love, if you will; and can be true, if you will. And so I beseech you to talk to me honestly, and tell me if you can love me, or if you do. I am not used to asking such questions of ladies, Alice, and I may seem rough and rude; but believe me, when I say you have won my whole heart, and I cannot be happy without you.'

'Yes, I believe you,' she said.

'But do you trust me, and do you love me?'

She might trifle with a trifle, but she was earnest enough with me.

'I trust you and I love you,' she answered frankly. 'Are you wondering why I can stand before you, and speak so calmly? Because, I do not think I shall ever marry you. You do not love me as I have always said my husband should love me. I am wayward and exacting, and I should weary your life out by my constant craving for tenderness. I was made to be petted and spoiled; and you though a loving, are not an affectionate man. You would wish me at the bottom of the Red Sea before we had been married a month; and because you could not get me there, you would go to work and break my heart by way of amusement. I know it as well as if I had seen it all—even now.'

She looked at me, and all her woman's heart and nature were in her eyes. They spoke love and passion, and deep, deep tenderness—and all for me. Something leaped into life in my heart at that moment which I had never felt before—something that made my affection of the last few hours seem cold and dead beside its fervid glow. I had her in my arms within the instant—close—close to my heart.

'Alice! if ever man loved woman with heart and soul—madly and unreasonably if you will but still truly and honestly—I love you, my darling.'

'But will it last? O Frank, tell me, will it last.'