

"There were no people on the shore; there was no one but the kelp-king to answer her cries as the arms, like serpents, came nearer and nearer.

"'Surely I can reach the shore,' she cried, plunging from the rock into the water swirling with the gleaming kelp; but the king laughed, and she sank as the arms seized her and drew her down to the silent caves of the sea. Soon the waves covered the rock, and in the later morning, children on the sandy beach beyond the cliffs found the dead body of a cuckoo.

"They carried it to their parents. 'Yes,' said they, 'it is a cuckoo; it was probably too weary to reach the shore, and has been drowned in the sea, the poor thing.'"

The Nymph of the Alder.

IN April the autumn clothes its favourites in russet and gold, and scarfs them with mists of silver in the dim evenings and the frosty mornings. That is in Christchurch where Armagh Street has two bridges; one leading west into the liberal leafiness of Hagley Park, the other leading east into the Town; and if you stand on this second bridge for an hour or two in April, you may see, first the evening glow of the tree-broken horizon of western sky, and when that has faded, turn and see the awakening of the evening glow of the Town. Both are beautiful.

To the left, as you face the Town, the little plot of Victoria Square gives an open space, not very wide, across which the lights come with some little mellowing of distance. The silver birches, too, that encircle the space, break the light with their thousand-branched traceries, dark in the dusk; and for a time real beauty lingers like a star-whorl, hemmed in by the buildings, but open to the sky. The broad masses of white light from the shop windows coming through the birches, or under them and over the grass; the yellower light of street lamps; the raying intense blue of a few arc-lamps held higher on the ornamental car poles in the middle of the street; and above the tops of the buildings the pale hesitant light of the coming stars—these invest the square with a beauty that is most perfect in these April evenings.

There has been a hurrying of people; a humming of flashing and glowing cars; for the dusking town has been sending home the first troop of its workers; the fortunate ones whose working day ends at five.

If at such times the nymphs of the trees come out mist-enveloped in the quiet dusk, and sit alone with glowing eyes in the silences, who will wonder? Near this bridge are many trees, graceful enough to be the abode of beautiful beings; nor did I wonder when the nymph of the alder came slowly, silently, up the darkening slope, and stood near me watching the flickering blue lights, and the dark, quietly flowing Avon that talked to its pixies in broken, mysterious speech, the lipping of the unknown that lies at the borderland of the

known. From the shelter of their trees, these nymphs through the years have seen many things; and many are the tales they can tell;—but usually they are silent unless one is able to read the meaning of the murmur of the leaves, and sit watching, watching, watching, and dreaming.

But this evening my nymph of the alder seemed talkative; it may be that she was tired of her own thronging but silent company; and after a few moments she began, as if continuing something she had already said;—but evidently she was continuing her thought in speech, for she had said nothing to me.

“Yes, it is a season of beauty, and this is a beautiful corner,” said the nymph as I looked across the square; “and to think that so short a time since there were no buildings here such as you now see,”—and as she said the words the buildings as it were mouldered away,—“and no trees,”—and the trees melted into the mist and were gone,—“and no bright lights,”—and they dimmed away into darkness,—“and no bridge,”—and I found we were standing among flax and fern, on the bank of a quickly flowing stream, tussock-covered ground behind us, where mysterious winds whispered from western darkness like voices from the past. “That is how your river and your square looked, not so many years ago,” said she.

There was little to be seen under the bright stars; but there was a light low in the east, and a waning moon arose and shed a faint light on a strange scene. It was as a dream. Was this undulating wilderness of tussock, and fern, and tutu, this waste broken only by the flax and toetoe-bordered stream the site upon which were to cluster the homes and shops of Christchurch? It seemed altogether unreal; and the nymph as unreal as the scene.

Now rough tracks appeared, cut through the growth; old-fashioned, sharp-gabled buildings arose here and there in the moonlight, the small-paned windows gleaming yellow in the doubtful light. A solitary horseman, whistling softly, made for the corner building—an accommodation house—known prophetically as the “Golden Fleece.”

On the rugged ground before me now arose a long, narrow building, roughly built, with barred windows, but no doors visible—and suddenly the place flashed with swinging lanterns, and echoed with voices and laughter. Heavy vehicles appeared; bullock drays; horses were taken out and tethered; the folk seemed in holiday humour. Music sounded; there was dancing.

“Do you recognise it?” asked my companion.

“I believe I do,” I answered, “for I have heard of it from men who came in the first four ships.—They are proud, you know, of being among the first, and as the four ships arrived three on one day and one on the next, every man of them claims to have come in the first four. And men from without laugh at this simple boast of the simple pioneers—‘I came in the first four’—but there is much they may learn from these grey-haired men with the hearts ever singing and young.—And this building is the first jail of Christchurch. They gather their joys by the way as children gather daisies, and they are celebrating the opening with a dance. The cells are the dressing rooms.”

Well; our good pioneers found romance scattered broadcast over the yellow plains;—even their jail must yield them amusement.

As I stood thinking of those days, and of the strange characters that drifted in from other colonies, Van Demonians and ticket-of-leave men and lags and the rest, on the opposite triangle of the square appeared the old Maori encampment, and strange sounds mingled with the music of the dancing. Then both camp and jail melted away, and the old post office arose on one side, growing into the imposing coffee-palace, and on the other the buildings, hardly more than booths, of the market-place. It was Saturday night, for the shops were bright with lamps and torches, and faint lights shone here and there in the streets.

If I could not remember the jail, at least I could remember the market-place, from which the space was called the Market Square. I remembered the poulterers’ booths, the fishmongers’, the greengrocers’, but especially the neat shop,—I think it was the corner shop near Cook and Ross, and facing the palace,—with its attraction of fresh bread, and buns, and rows of bottles of amber-coloured honey. Most appropriate was the name of the proprietor, who, on the market being demolished, moved not far off into Colombo Street, where he kept an equally attractive shop, almost exactly similar to the old one in the square.

On the west side of the market a cobbled way was laid down to the river, and there horses were watered, and carts taken in to be washed,—for the roads were rutty and rough in the winter season, and dusty in the summer. This was always an interesting place for idle boys, some of whom sat on the bank fishing for silveries as they watched the watering. Along the banks to the right, a swing bridge appeared; a narrow bridge, with tall wooden Gothic arches at either end for the support of the cables. Behind us rose a Gothic

wooden pile—the old Provincial Buildings, beautifully designed and decorated;—and on the other side of Armagh Street, along Chester Street, the stone pile of the Supreme Court. These early folk had an eye for architecture, and courage to carry out their ideas and ideals.

I smiled as I thought of the many old-day stories the growing buildings called to mind; and I smiled as I thought of the old-day story-tellers.

“There were two notable men of words and worth,” said I to my nymph; “two veterans of the tongue and the pen; and they gave me curiously similar advice. ‘If you want the truth about the early days,’ said the one, ‘don’t you ever go to old George H—:’ and the other said, ‘Yes, old S— has plenty of anecdotes, only you mustn’t go to him for facts, for you can’t believe a word he says.’ Yes, they were both full of tales and of the lore of coming age: and both were very near the truth.”

“In what respect?” asked the nymph; “as regards their tales, or their advice?”

“Don’t ask me,” said I; “for both were good fellows, and had many friends.”

Constantly new buildings were growing as we spoke;—the coffee-palace disappeared,—the market-place.

“We are living through my own days,” said I; and the square, cleared of litter, broke into flower beds, and grass plots, bordered with trees. The statue appeared that gave the new name Victoria Square,—the band rotunda, where crowds hear the Thursday evening music, receiving, in a way, a musical education without being aware of it.

“How feeble an echo seems the music of the dance in the jail,” said I, “and how feeble a glow seems the one cast by the swinging lanterns.”

“As feeble as pictures of a dream appear on waking,” agreed the nymph.

But now; but now;—what was taking place?—my nymph must be casting spells; must be working gramarye;—for the familiar things were going;—the rotunda was gone; and in the blaze of light a dim shape was emerging from the mists that hung over the Avon under the autumn moon.

I looked at my nymph. She leaned with her arms on the iron railing of the bridge, chin forward, and dreamy eyes fixed on the emerging shape. A faintest smile flickered on her lips. My eyes left her, and rested again on the shape;—a building was growing, lifting from either side of the river, and over the river, between the Colombo and Victoria Street bridges.

A round-arched stone bridge spanned the river, and from the platform supported by the bridge led a broad flight of steps, widening as they descended, the terminal of the ballustrade at either wing bearing a statue. The platform was half the width of the building, and the arch on either side was surmounted with a many-branched electric lamp, that flashed in the water below where lay the reflection of the arch, blurred in the slowly moving river. A broad Gothic doorway, with deep and heavy moulding supported on many slender pillars, pierced the front. Between round pillars supporting a fretted balcony were deep, tall windows, a slender pillar supporting a double arch. Above the door sprang a square tower with Gothic windows and traceries, a clock in the upper portion, and a ball of light above all. The side too was pierced with narrow windows in two tiers, and pillars and niches broke up the flatness. In a few of the niches were statues and busts.

“Of men and women notable in Canterbury,” said the nymph as my eyes rested on these; — “in Canterbury, and other lesser places,” she added.

The triangle where the rotunda had stood was laid out in gardens as an approach to the steps; the garden went right to the river’s ornamental bank, across the road that once ran at the riverside. The whole was brilliant with light.

Numbers of beautifully dressed women, and men more sombrely clothed, trooped from the electric cars. They thronged the approach, the steps, the platform. The whole moved with colour.

“The fashions have gone further,” I thought as I watched them, remembering the half-timid fashion of my own days,—the shortened skirts, the neat shoes, the bewildering stockings, the ever-changing silk petallings that seemed melting away like mists from the warm beauties beneath them.

Lights beamed like jewels through the windows of stained glass, and shone here and there on pinnacles along the walls, on the tower, lighting up the whole building till it glowed under the pale moon like a great jewel. And soon from its living centre throbbed waves and ripples of music, a sea of sound, that almost seemed to take colour, streaming out from the facet-windows, sound and colour intermingled.

“Is the interior as beautiful?” I asked.

“It is as beautiful,” answered the nymph; “the people were resolved that they should make a really creditable thing of their Town Hall.”

“Their Town Hall?” I exclaimed incredulously.

“Yes; you know how many many years they thought of it, and talked of it.”

NEW ZEALAND TALES.

"I do indeed;—but a Town Hall!"

"Is it not good enough?—Think of the examples they had. The early folk were not afraid of great things;—remember the tunnel; the railway; the Provincial Chambers; the Cathedral—"

"Yes, yes; I know," I interrupted; "but my dear nymph!—you do not know the people of Christchurch. The works you mention are as the relics of a bygone era;—the present people will not venture on such undertakings. 'Wait,' they say, 'wait and see what Wellington does; what Auckland does;—wait and see if money won't get cheaper;—we don't think it would pay;—wait, perhaps someone will make us a bequest.' Now the older era never thought in that way, or talked in that way; they had no care for what others did or would do; they had no time to wait for visionary bequests or more visionary cheap money; their thoughts were big and their acts were big;—but the present people of Christchurch!—my dear nymph—"

But even as I spoke the building slowly faded away, the music died, the lights dwindled;—the rotunda came again, the filagree of trees.

I turned to my nymph, but she too had faded with the rest; and I was sorry;—for I had much more to say to her about these good people of Christchurch.