The Poetry of Indians

by James S. Brisbin

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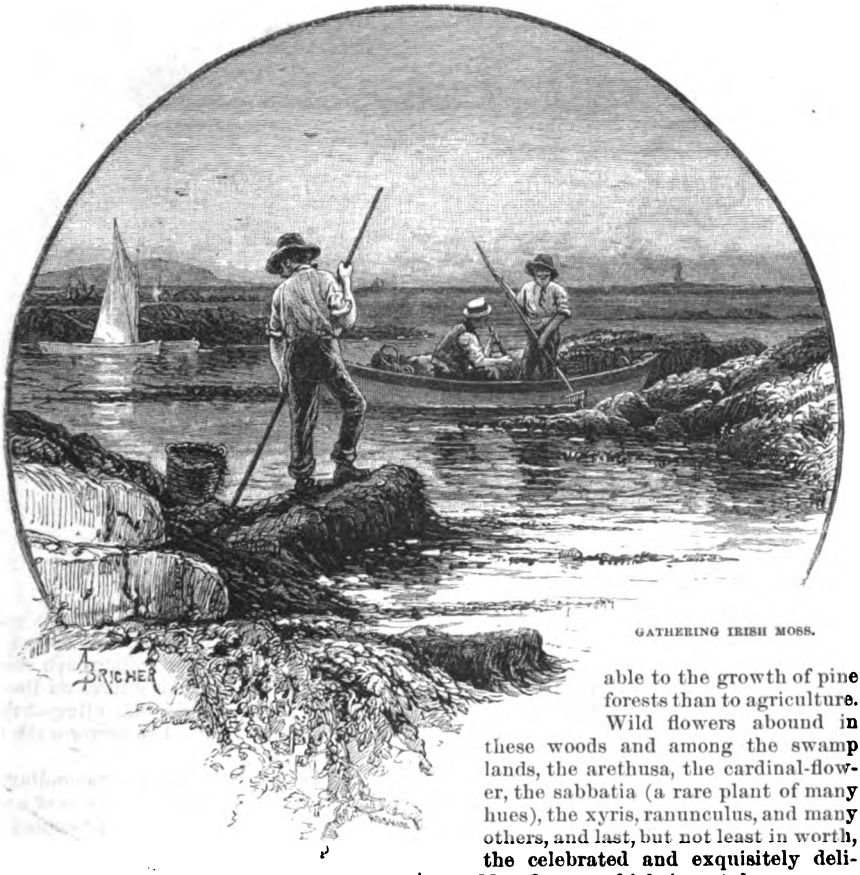

GATHERING IRISH MOSS.

ALONG THE SOUTH SHORE.

THE South Shore is the name given to the coast of Plymouth County in Massachusetts, extending from Hull to Plymouth on the southerly side of Massachusetts Bay. Possessing many charming bits of coast and rural scenery, it has also historic associations which are of the most heroic character. Plymouth is the largest township in the State. The landscape is undulating; the hills, if not very lofty, are often quite striking on account of their abruptness. The soil is sandy, and therefore more favorable to the growth of pine forests than to agriculture. Wild flowers abound in these woods and among the swamp lands, the arethusa, the cardinal-flower, the sabbatia (a rare plant of many hues), the xyris, ranunculus, and many others, and last, but not least in worth, the celebrated and exquisitely delicate May-flower, which is not, however, as some suppose, confined to Plymouth County, for it is a flourishing denizen of the whole of New England. The township of Plymouth is fairly inlaid with lakes of all sizes, and so numerous it is fabled that there is one for every day in the year. The most interesting of these is named the Billington Sea, after one of the Pilgrims, who first discovered it from the top of a high tree. There still the eagle soars above the placid lake, or screams from his eyrie in the cliff, as when Massasoit and King Philip fashioned and shot arrows feathered from his

ing her name, Wildeve had flung toward Eustacia a glance which said, plainly, "I have punished you now." She had replied, in a low tone, and he little thought how truly, "You mistake; it gives me sincerest pleasure to see her your wife to-day."

THE POETRY OF INDIANS.

THE Indians have no books, and their history is wholly oral. The tales and traditions handed down from father to son are the only connecting link between the present and the past. It is the songs, ceremonies, and poetry of the Indians that form their principal history. The difficulty of rendering these songs will be apparent to every one, when it is remembered that the Indian has no grammar or well-defined sounds in his language. Motion of the hands and gutturals constitute much of his tongue, and these, of course, are not easily defined on paper. There is, however, something to be gleaned in the field of Indian poetry, though the task is so difficult that one may well undertake it with feelings of hesitation, for never was a subject more intricate.

The clouds, the sun, moon, stars, storms, the lightnings, the voice of the thunder—these are the fruitful themes that fill the savage soul with song, and from which he draws symbols in his chants and stories.

War, love, and the chase burst from his lips in weird music, but it is impossible to reduce to metre and connect the flashes of his genius. His monosyllables, his eye, the nod of his head and waving of hands—all these are potential in his song, and mean more than mere words. Viewed in this light, the winds have voices, the leaves of the trees utter a language, and even the earth is animated with a crowd of unseen but beautiful spirits. Hence many of the Indian songs are accompanied with intangible music that can neither be caught nor written.* No two languages could be more dissimilar than Indian and English, and it is only the meanest kind of Indian poetry that can be caught and set to words of our tongue.

The Indian girl dancing before her warrior utters not a word, yet she clearly conveys the meaning of her dance.† Would she have him go to the chase, she skips like a deer, pointing with outstretched hands to the imagined flying game, and finally, after circling and heading him, launches the fatal spear that is to slay him.‡ Would she have him go to war, with slow and measured step the preparations are made, arrows headed, placed in the quiver, and she briskly marches away.§ Presently the enemy is seen and the fight begins; then the enemy flies, is overtaken, and, snatching an arrow from her lover's quiver, she fires it through the heart of the imaginary foe, and while he lies bleeding at her feet she imitates the removing of the scalp; and placing it in triumph at her belt, the dance is ended. All this is done without uttering a word, yet every motion of that wild savage fantasia is clearly intelligible, and through it the warrior learns the will of his mistress in language more powerful and exciting than mere words.

So it is of Indian song; the motion forms the poetry, and the words are but the dull filling up of a mystical and beautiful conception. How shall we translate such a language? It is impossible, and we can at best only gather the chaff, leaving the golden grain to be imagined—to be heard like the sighing of winds, the whispering of leaves, but never to be reduced to the dull theory of created matter and material form.

In time of war Indians pay great attention to the flight of birds,* and hence frequent allusions are made to them in their battle songs. If the bird is carnivorous, and flies toward the enemy, it indicates that the party will be victorious from which it flies, and that the bird has gone to pick the bones of the foes they are to slay in battle. It is thus the Sioux sing when they see the flight of eagles toward their enemies:

> The eagles scream on high,
> They whet their forked beaks:
> Raise, raise the battle cry,
> 'Tis fame our leader seeks.

Or if it is desired to arouse their young men to deeds of noble daring, they cry:†

> The birds of the brave take flight round the sky,
> They cross the enemy's line:
> Full happy am I that my body shall lie
> Where brave men love to die.

Bah-bam-wa-zehig-equa, the Indian poet, wrote a song on "The Frog in Spring," which, if it could be rendered into good English, would undoubtedly equal some of Tom Hood's or Edgar A. Poe's best productions. In blank verse it runs thus:

> See how the white spirit presses us—
> Presses us—presses us, heavy and long—
> Presses down to the frost-bitten earth.
> Alas! you are heavy, ye spirits so white;
> Alas! you are cold, you are cold, you are cold.
> Ah! cease, shining spirits that fell from the skies—
> Ah! cease so to crush us and keep us in dread.
> Ah! when will ye vanish, and spring-time return?

This song, by a slight transposition of the original language, may also be rendered into metre, and made to read as follows:

> Robed in his mantle of snow from the sky,
> See how the white spirit presses our breath;
> Heavily, coldly, the masses they lie;
> Sighing and panting, we struggle for breath.

* Schoolcraft's *Book of Indians*. † *Belden's Letters*.
‡ *Catlin among the Savages*.
§ Father De Smet on Indian ceremonies.

* *Old Indian Traditions*, by Schoolcraft.
† Belden's *Life with the Sioux Indians*.

Spirit! O spirit! who first in the air
The Great Master Monedo* wondrously made,
Cease to be pressing the sons of his care,
And fly to the blue heights from whence ye have strayed.

Then we shall cheerfully, praisingly sing,
Okógis,† Okógis, the heralds of spring,
First to announce to the winter-bound hall
Sunshine and verdure and gladness to all.

The Indians believe that birds are intelligent creatures, and can foretell man's destiny, and they therefore regard their presence as indicative of good or evil, and often undertake to interpret the messages they bring. The Saginaw Indians have a hawk chant, which they sing, and which best illustrates this strange conception of the savage mind:

The hawks turn their heads nimbly round,
They turn to look back in their flight;
The spirits of sun-place have whispered them words,
They fly with their messages swift;
They look as they fearfully go,
They look to the farthermost end of the earth,
Their eyes glancing bright, and their beaks boding harm.

There is a beautiful bird song, in the same language, written about the falcon—a bird which the Saginaws say lives in the open air with the Great Spirit, and possesses a mysterious knowledge of His will. Here it is:

Birds! ye wild birds, whom the high gods have made,
And gifted with power of wondrous kind,
Why turn ye so fearfully, shy and dismayed,
To gaze on the heavens ye are leaving behind?

Come ye with news of a mystical cast,
Speaking of enemies crouched in the wood,
Who on our people shall burst like a blast,
Heralding ruin, destruction, and blood?

Come ye with messages sent from on high,
Warning of what the wild heavens shall pour—
Whirlwinds, tornadoes, or pestilence nigh,
Wailing, starvation, or death on our shore?

Come ye with words from the Master of Life,
Bringing intelligence good in your track?—
Ah, then, ye bright birds with messages rife,
Why do you turn your heads doubtingly back?

The story of Shingebris has often been published in books, but I do not know that I have ever seen it rendered in verse, and I am sure the poetry gives strongest evidence of the capacity of the Indian mind to form beautiful theories.

Kabibonocca, the God of Winter, froze up all the country, and drove the inhabitants to the South; yet one poor man, Shingebris, in defiance of the icy god, remained by the side of a lake. Kabibonocca, offended at the fellow's perverseness, blew his bitterest blasts, determined if possible to drive him away; but Shingebris, the brave man, declared he would not go, and continued to subsist on fish. "Shall he withstand me?" cried the enraged Ice God; and summoning all his power, he said, "I will go and see this fellow, and freeze him stiff." So he went to the cabin of Shingebris, who, knowing of his coming, had a roaring fire on his hearth, and when Winter knocked at his door, he said, quite blithely, "Come in, Sir." The god entered, and did his best to freeze Shingebris, but he only poked the fire, and never minded him. Finally, Winter, finding unless he made off he should be melted, with tears in his eyes cried out, "Egad, I can not stand this! I am roasting!" and began his retreat, when Shingebris struck up his song of defiance:

Windy god, I know your plan:
You are but my fellow-man;
Blow you may your coldest breeze,
Shingebris you can not freeze;
Sweep the strongest breeze you can,
Shingebris is still your man.
Heigh for life, and ho for bliss!
Who so free as Shingebris?

What conception could be more beautiful or more typical of the Indian in his lodge and by the side of his warm fire defying the cold blasts of winter?

Waub Ojeeg, a Chippewa chief, composed the following war-song in commemoration of his expedition against the Sioux, and to encourage his warriors to again go on the war-path:

On that day when our heroes lay low, lay low—
On that day when our heroes lay low,
I fought by their side, and thought ere I died
Just vengeance to take on the foe, the foe—
Just vengeance to take on the foe.

On the day when our chieftains lay dead, lay dead—
On that day when our chieftains lay dead,
I fought hand to hand at the head of my band,
And here on my breast have I bled, have I bled—
And here on my breast have I bled.

Our chiefs shall return no more, no more—
Our chiefs shall return no more,
Nor their brethren of war, who can show scar for scar,
Like women their fate shall deplore, deplore—
Like women their fate shall deplore.

Five winters in hunting we'll spend, we'll spend—
Five winters in hunting we'll spend;
Then our youth, grown to men, we'll to war lead again,
And our days like our fathers' will end, will end—
And our days like our fathers' will end.

Below I shall give some extracts of Indian songs literally translated:

Indian... {Ningah peendegay aindahyaig
{We he heway.—
English....I will walk into some one's dwelling.

Indian... {Ningah peendegay aindahyaig
{We he weway.—
English....I will walk into somebody's house.

Indian... {Nenemoshain aindahyaig
{Non dah debik ningah peendigay
{We he heway.—
English.. {My sweetheart is in that house;
{I will walk in in the night.

Indian... {Nenemoshain nondah pebon
{Ningah peendigay
{We he heway.—
English.. {My sweetheart, in the winter
{I shall walk into your lodge.

Indian... {Nondah tibik ningah peendigay
{We he heway.—
English....This night I will walk into your lodge.

The meaning of this in English is at first

* Indian god. † Okógis, God of Spring.

somewhat obscure, but in the Indian tongue it is very clear. The lover at first indicates that he is in love with some one, or, as he expresses it, "will walk into somebody's house." Then he delicately states whose house it will be; and in the third verse, as if ashamed, he says he will come in the night. In the fourth verse he becomes more bold, and says he will come in winter, and finally he declares he will come that very night. This is making love with a vengeance, and to a white maiden such a serenade would be very alarming, but to the dusky maid of the forest each note is sweetest music and a welcome sound.

Wi ha ya dinawido
Wi ha ya dinawido
Ki-awa-we.

Wi ha ya dinawido
Wi ha ya dinawido
Ki-awa-we-yo.

Ozam gosha Kiwawa nishkon E-do
Kikomas ninga nadin
Kikomas nungo nadin
Gosha-we-yo.

This can not be easily rendered into either English poetry or prose, though it is a very amusing song in the Indian tongue. The substance of it is that a lover no longer loved his mistress, because she walked with her toes turned in, or, in other words, was somewhat reel-footed. He positively announces that he is going to hunt up her clothing, and that when he brings it to her she must pack off about her business and not bother him. This may be dull enough in English, but in Indian it is quite as lively as "Shoo, fly, don't bodder me," and indeed sounds very much like it, the words being constantly repeated in the same absurd manner:

She walks, she walks, she walks,
She walks with her toes turned in;
She walks, she walks, she walks,
She walks with her toes turned in, etc.

Repetition is one of the peculiarities of Indian song, and we find a fond girl thus lamenting her lover:

Ya-Nindenendon, Ya-Nindenendon
Ya-Nindenendon, Nitchawiyanin
Naninoushen-win
Jibi, Akking-win, Pinossedoog.

Which may be rendered:

Alas! I think,
Alas! I think,
Alas! I think,
Oh, how I think of him!

Of my dear lover
In the land of dreams.
Does he hunt or roam?
Oh! it sets me thinking
Of my dear lover
In the land of dreams,
Where he is roaming.

Again:

Indenaindum makow weyah
Nindemadum
Pahbojeaun nebemanbekoning
Whabi megissun nenemoshain
Nindenaindum, etc., etc., etc.

Which, rendered into literal English, reads:

Ah me! when I think of him,
My sweetheart!
As he embarked to return
He put white wampum round my neck,
And said, I'll soon be back again.

Shall I go to you, my sweetheart?
Shall I go to your native land?
Alas! it is far away, sweetheart—
Far away is your native land.

When I look back where we parted,
Where he stood looking at me,
On a tree that had fallen by the water,
And my sweetheart gazed at me,

Alas! how I think of him!
Alas! how I fret and pine!
Alas! how I think of him,
The sweetheart that was mine!

Or again:

Nyan nin de naidum
Nyan nin de naidum
Nakow e yaun in siaug e ug
Nakow e yaun in siaug e ug
Nakow e yaun in siaug e ug
Nyan inandah man nin
Nyan inandah man nin.

Makow e yaun in
Kaw e go yaum bum
Nyan, etc., etc.

Pan oje mid kan we ji win
Nin je in ain dum
Nakow e yaum in
Nyan nin de nain dum
Makow," etc., etc.

Which, in literal language, we read as follows:

Oh dear, thinks I,
Oh dear, thinks I,
Of him whom I remember,
Of him whom I remember.

Oh dear, when my mind thinks,
Oh dear, when my mind thinks
What was said to me
When I was left behind!

When he came and put his hands around my neck,
I'll go with you, my heart replied,
But my lips were still,
And now I can only think of him.

The following is a Chippewa war-song:

Oshawamong undausewaug
Panaissee wug ke bain waiwe dung-ig.

Todatabe penaisse
Kedow wea weyun.

Newabenan neowan
Newabenan neowan.

In English:

From the South they come,
The birds, the warlike birds, with sounding wings.

I wish I could change myself
To the body of that swift bird.

I'd throw my body in the strife—
I'd throw my body in the strife.

The warrior speaks to the bird, and says:

"Nanakawe penessewain"
("From time to time I dwell in a bird").

The bird replies:

"Kenakoomin nozis"
("I answer thee, my son-in-law").

The corn-husking season is one of great hilarity among the semi-civilized Indians, and many young people meet together at

social huskings. On such occasions if a young female finds a red ear of corn, it is indicative that she has a brave sweetheart, and she must present it to the warrior she likes best. If, however, the ear is *crooked*, or tapering to a point, the whole circle is set in a roar, and it is considered the image of an old man thief who enters life with hers. "Wa-ge-min! wa-ge-min!" is then shouted by all, and the whole merry troop sets up the corn-song:

Wa-ge-min wa-ge-min
Paimosaid
Wa-ge-min wa-ge-min
Paimosaid.

Bakan Kewaizee
Ka saugizzesse.

Wa-ge-min wa-ge-min
Kinabowid
Wa-ge-min wa-ge-min.
Ninzah nugamood.

Which, being liberally rendered, would read:

Crooked ear, crooked ear,
Walker at night;
Stop, little old man,
And take not to flight.

Crooked ear, crooked ear,
Stand up strong;
Little old crooked man,
I'll give you a song.

The Cherokees have a song of friendship, which in their language reads thus:

Kan-al-li eh ne was to
Yai ne no wai si e noo ho
Ti mai tan na Klai ne was tu
Yai ne wai E-noo wai hoo.

You resemble a friend of mine,
And you look like a friend to me;
I think that we are brothers kind,
And brothers we will be.

There is a beautiful little song in the Chippewa language which is full of pathos and rhyme, and which the little children sing when at play in the evening. A traveller thus describes it: "One evening while in the Chippewa village I was attracted by shouts of merriment from childish voices, and I walked out to the green lawn skirting the edge of the river to get a full view of the players and hear their songs. A group of children were at play gambolling and chasing the fire-flies, millions of which little insects filled the air, making the plain to literally sparkle with phosphorescent light. The following are the words which they addressed to the insect:

"Wau wau tay see!
Wau wau tay see!
E-now e shin
Tashe bwan ne baun e wee
Bee eghaun-be eghaun-e wee
Wa wan tay see
Wa wan tay see
Was sa koon ain je gun
Was sa koon ain ja gun."

Literally translated, they would read:

Flitting white fire-fly,
Waving white fire-bug,
Give me light to go to bed,
Give me light to go to sleep.

Or, by a slight transposition of the words in the original language, Mr. Goodrich has made them read, when rendered in free translation:

Fire-fly! fire-fly! bright little thing,
Light me to bed while my song I sing;
Give me your light as you fly o'er my head,
That I may merrily go to my bed;
Give me your light o'er the grass as you creep,
That I may joyfully go to my sleep.

Come, little fire-fly, come, little beast,
Come, and I'll make you to-morrow a feast;
Come, little candle, that flies as I sing,
Bright little fairy bug, night's little king;
Come, and I'll dance as you guide me along;
Come, and I'll pay you, my bug, with a song.

The following is the Twenty-third Psalm, written in both the English and Indian (Algonquin) tongue:

Mar teag nukquenaabikoo
Shepse nanaauk Monedo
Nussepsinwahik ashkoshquat
Nutuk ohtopagod.—

The Lord is my shepherd, and I'll not want;
He makes me down to lie;
In pastures green He leadeth me,
The quiet waters by.

Nagun nakketeahog kounoh
Watomohkinuh wonk
Nutuss∞unuk ut sampio waay
Newutch ∞wesnok.—

My soul He doth restore again,
And me to walk doth make
Within the paths of righteousness,
E'en for His own name's sake.

Wutonkauhtamut pomushaon
Mupp∞ouk ∞nauhkoe
Woskehettuenk mo nukquel tam∞
Newutch k∞wetomah.

Kuppogkomunk Kutanwohon
Nish n∞nenehiquog
K∞noch∞ hkah anquabbetti
Wame nummatwomog.—

Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale,
Yet will I fear none ill,
For Thou art with me, and Thy rod
And staff me comfort still.

Kusussqunum nuppuhkuk
Weetepummee nashpea
Wonk woi Monedo n∞tallamwaitch
Pomponetuphos hau.—

My table Thou hast furnished
In presence of my foes,
My head Thou dost with oil anoint,
And my cup overflows.

∞niyeuonk monaneteonk
Nulasukkonkqunash
Tohsohke pomatam wekit Monedo
Michem nuttain pish.—

Goodness and mercy all my life
Shall surely follow me,
And in God's house for evermore
My dwelling-place shall be.

It will be observed that in rendering the above example from the sacred writings into Indian the figure 8 is used set horizontally. There is a peculiar sound in the Indian tongue that no letter of the English alphabet will express, and to express this Eliot first used the figure 8, and his example has been ever since followed. All other savage sounds can be expressed by the letters of

the alphabet. I shall conclude these examples from Indian poetry by giving a verbatim translation of an Indian hymn that was much in use a few years ago among the Chippewa Indians:

> Ever let piety and prayer
> Be the rule of our lives,
> The Great Spirit alone,
> Alone let us love.
>
> All evil living of mankind,
> All, all that's bad or weak—
> All evil living, as a tainted wind,
> All, let us all forsake."

IN A STORM.

THE rain was drizzling out of a damp heaven as if a cloud were driving toward us and breaking over us; the wind, which had risen at daylight, was swelling with every succeeding blast; and the river was rolling in white-caps. Still, there was no question of laying the boat by when our party from the hills came down and went aboard with much ado and merry-making.

The *Huntress* was a river craft that made connection at Desbars, the little port on the bay at the river's mouth, with the sea boat that would take us by a farther voyage to our journey's end. Indeed, the *Huntress* was not much of an affair anyway, and the accommodations were such that we all preferred to remain above, even in the rain, being well protected in gossamer rubber, high boots, and all the modern improvements. We were a gay party, who had been amusing ourselves, as travelling companions do, with reading and fancy-work, flirtation and scandal. Among others we numbered Mrs. Howison, the *doyenne* of the party, who gave it eminent respectability, kept every body up in his pedigree, and did the diamonds, as Belle Evans said; Belle herself, who did the beauty; Mrs. Cameron, her chaperon, and the mother of Lucia and John; Miss Marvin, an heiress struggling with idiocy, whose money was possibly the loadstone of one or two youths who hung upon our verge, as Belle said, not of us, yet not against us. Of the girls, Miss Evans was, perhaps, the most beautiful, yet Miss Murray, with her clear, dark, colorless face, and the great gray eyes, faultless features, and dark hair, and with her manner of proud reserve, stimulated curiosity and interest considerably more. Tall, and perhaps too stately, with her silence and her haughty ways, she impressed you as one with a history; yet when I had been with her one day more than usual, Mrs. Howison begged to assure me that people often lost caste by associating with the commonplace, and that Miss Murray was only Mrs. Cameron's companion, engaged to relieve Lucia from the trouble of reading and playing to her mother. "Not one of us at all, my dear, but a few steps above the servants," said the good Dame Howison. "She is an excellent person in her place, but Mrs. Cameron herself knows next to nothing about her, although she has employed her for nearly six years; so, you see, my dear," said the *doyenne*. And her authority perhaps added a sting to the general behavior of the maids and matrons in this regard.

Yet Belle Evans was also not without interest to the impartial view, the more as she carried on a love affair and a flirtation at the same time, her engagement with John Cameron having lately been broken, and her heart with it, it was understood, which fragmentary condition of her system she was supposed to be concealing by the disguise of pleasure in Colonel Bates's society, Colonel Bates being the next friend of John Cameron himself. As for Lucia, Miss Marvin, and the rest, doubtless some portion of the world would have missed them had they suddenly dropped out of it. Such as we were, we had passed some pleasant days together, for even although Belle, every day more distracting, drove Cameron to the beginning of despair by her behavior with Colonel Bates—who was blindly convinced that he only did his friend good service in keeping her from worse mischief—and Cameron reduced Belle to the same pass by the exasperating indifference with which he viewed her conduct, yet such sweet sorrow seemed better to them apparently than any common experience of joy, and they did their best to prolong and accentuate it. "It is better than a novel; it is as good as a play," said I once to Miss Murray, for, in spite of Dame Howison, we had somehow taken to each other, "for here are the actors living and real before you," and I remember catching her eye again when she smiled despite herself at these side scenes, although somewhat too indignant concerning the shrubs and blossoms with which young Black was loading her just then to smile at all.

"You look like Birnam Wood," Belle had cried.

"And feel as if Dunsinane were at the ends of the earth," she had answered.

And Sally Marvin, then looking Miss Murray over from head to foot, talked afterward to Lucia, as she always did on such opportunity, with an odd sort of insolent laughter between the syllables. The color came to Miss Murray's face; but she never noticed any thing of the kind, not even thanking Belle by a glance when the latter resented her affronts. It was not frequently, indeed, that she was positively affronted, but commonly that she was completely ignored. It seemed to make small odds to her. She reminded you of some one who, being in life, must get through it, but looked for no pleasure in it, scorning the disdain of women, and indifferent to the admiration of men.