

CHAPTER XI

THOUGH several years have elapsed since my journey across those wild vast regions, the remembrance of them is most vivid and clear in my mind. It seems to me that everything in that period of my life, landscape and human beings, forest and plain, stream and cloud, mountains and breezes, all, all are still alive ; they form part of the panorama or scene wherein my memory keeps them immortal, abiding for ever as I saw them, though unattainable to me. What was, is ; what was, must be ; so I imagine. Memory is in this respect like the artist. The sculptor or the painter seizes one moment of life, fashions and records it in marble or in bronze, in line or colour, and there it remains defying time, unchanging and unchangeable. The gallery of the mind, the vast storehouse of the past, is infinite. It keeps in its inmost

inexhaustible recesses the living record of our life, the tremulous shadowy hues of early night deepening into the dark, the glory of the rising sun casting its veil of light upon the waves, the sensation of the breeze as it fans our heated brow after an anxious night, the thunder of the ocean or the deafening tumult of frenzied crowds in hours of national misfortune or universal anger, the last parting word or look of those who are gone before, the blithe greeting of him who comes back to us after years of absence and of sorrow: all these manifestations of life, the ebb and flow of joy and happiness, of pain and grief, stand individualized, so to speak, in the memory, and nothing, save the loss of memory itself, can change them. Nothing so dear to the heart as those treasures; against them time and the vicissitudes of life are powerless—even as the lovers and the dancers and the singers and the enchanted leafy forest in Keats' 'Grecian Urn.' That love will know no disappointment. Sweet as songs heard may be, far sweeter are those unheard of human ear; beautiful as are the green boughs of the forest, far lovelier are those whose verdure is imperishable, whose

leaves will know no autumn ; and sweeter than all melody, the unheard melody of those flutes, dumb and mute in the infinite harmony which man can imagine, but not create. Our own mind keeps that record of the past ; hallowed and sacred should it be, for therein our sorrow may find relief, and our joy purity and new strength.

Beautiful indeed were our days. Gliding softly over the waters, we would read, and there, in forced and intimate communion with Nature, would seek our old-time friends the historians, the poets, the humbler singers that had charmed, or instructed, or taught us how to live. The lessons of history seemed clearer and more intelligible, the puissant and sonorous voice of poetry sounded fitly under that blue sky in the midst of those forests, even as the notes of the organ seem to vibrate and echo as in their very home, under the fretted vault of some Gothic temple. The majesty of surrounding Nature lent an additional charm to the voice of the great ones who had delivered a message of consolation and of hope to mankind. We lived now in Rome, now in Greece, now in modern Europe, and frequently the songs

of our own poets filled our minds with joy, as the twitter of native birds when the sun rose and the morning sparkled, bedewed with jewels that night had left on leaves and flowers.

One day, when we had grown expert in bargaining with the Indians, shortly before sunset a solitary Indian paddled towards our camp. He had been attracted by the novel sight. We had learnt that within the memory of living man no such large convoy as ours had passed through those waters; groups of eight or ten men in one canoe were the largest ever seen—at least, the largest groups of strangers. Here was a small army, with two large canoes and great abundance of strange and wonderful equipment—boxes, trunks, weapons, cooking utensils, many men with white faces and marvellous strange array; indeed, enough to attract the attention and curiosity of any child of the forest. The canoe upon which the Indian stood was barely six feet in length—so narrow and shallow that at a distance he seemed to stand on the very mirror of the waters. He carried a large paddle, shaped like a huge rose-leaf somewhat blunted at the end, and with a very long stem. He plunged this gracefully in

the water on either side, seeming hardly to bend or to make any effort, and in feathering there appeared a convex mirror of liquid glass, upon which the sunlight fell in prismatic hues each time that his paddle left the water. He drew near, and stood before us like a bronze statue. He was stark naked, save for a clout round his loins. On his brow was a crown of tiger-claws surmounted by two eagle feathers. Across his neck, hung by a string, was a small bag of woven fibre containing a piece of salt, some hooks made of bone and small harpoons which could be set on arrows, and two hollow reeds about an eighth of an inch in diameter and four or five inches long. By means of these reeds the Indians inhale through their nostrils an intoxicating powder, in which they delight. The man was young, powerfully built, about five feet ten in height, and well proportioned ; his teeth glistening and regular ; his eyes black and large, gleaming like live coals ; he was a perfect incarnation of the primitive race, and the hardships and exposure of his past life had left no more trace on him than the flowing waters of the river on the swan's-down.

Guided by our civilized instinct, which in

these utilitarian days prompts man to seek in whatever meets his eye, first and foremost, not its beauty or the symbol which it may represent, or the tendency towards something higher which it may indicate, but its utility, following this delightful system of our latest Christian civilization, I, in common with my companions, at once decided to exploit that simple spirit and press him into our service. Being unable to bargain ourselves—which was lucky for him, for in our enlightened way we should have driven a harder bargain than our men—we entrusted the task to Leal.

The Indian, also true to his instinct, immediately indicated—first by signs, and then by word of mouth, when he saw he was understood—that he craved a part of the innumerable riches before his eyes. He really did not ask for much; he wanted some salt, a knife, a piece of glass like a small mirror that he saw glittering in the hands of one of our men, and whatever else we might be willing to give. He was told that he could have all that he asked and more. He smiled broadly, and a light of joy came over his face. These were signs truly human, not yet trained into the hypocritical

conventions of well-bred society. As he stretched forth his hand, he was told that the gift was conditional—that he must earn the articles he coveted, that we expected him to sit beside the other paddlers and help to carry us for two or three days, whereupon he would receive these rich gifts from our prodigal bounty.

This statement seemed to our Indian interlocutor absurd, just as something utterly incongruous and ludicrous in business would strike the mind of a London banker. In his primitive mental organism the idea that one man should work for another was something that found no place. Those forests, rivers, and plains were his home; he roved free and fearless through them, alone or in the company of others, each one of whom provided for himself. A bargain—that basis of civilization, of culture, that great agent of progress and of human development—was something which he could not understand. The essence of the fact, and the fact itself, were beyond him. We could see the struggle between his greed and his love of freedom. The riches that we offered him tempted him far more than glittering diamonds

on the counter of a jeweller tempt a vain woman or a burglar at bay. Yet he overcame the temptation. The glad smile vanished ; his face darkened with a look that we could interpret as reproach, and possibly contempt ; he silently lifted his paddle, and with two strokes sped his canoe into mid-stream. Without glancing backwards, giving now and then a tremendous stroke, he disappeared in the distance. The rays of the sinking sun reddened the waters of the river and the surrounding horizon ; the Indian, upright in his canoe, seemed as if clad in a sheet of flame, and finally vanished as though consumed in the crimson glow. The sun itself in the western horizon resembled a huge ball of red-hot iron, as if the Cyclops and the Titans, after playing, had left it behind on the bosom of the endless plain, flat and still as the sea in a calm.