

THE CITY IN THE VALLEY.

BY MATTHEW LESTER.



SAINT BEUVE says "Nothing is swifter to decay than civilization; in three weeks the result of as many centuries is lost."

The flower of civilization that springs in our bonanza towns and cities bears a decidedly American fragrance. Given precisely the same conditions, a like development would be impossible in any other clime. But when once this bloom is cut down, no ruin of fable or legend is more complete.

During a walking tour in the summer of 189— the close of an August day found me at, apparently, a considerable distance from human habitation.

I had strayed from the beaten track, tempted by the charming scenery of a winding brook.

I wanted to find its source and catch a view of a

"Bosky dell
Where tiny rivulets rise and swell,"

when I noticed, half hidden by trees at my right, a cluster of buildings.

It was still some distance away, so I made all possible speed toward it. I let down an intervening pair of bars and stepped into a grassy meadow flecked with daisies.

Beyond this opened a vista of low massive hills, now covered with a rising purple mist,

I tried to brush up my rather rusty recollections of the topography of the State, for I saw as I went on that not one but a large number of buildings occupied the valley.

I paused in front of the first house, a long, low structure, in appearance like a typical country hotel. The windows were gone, in some instances not even the casements remaining. As I put my foot on the veranda floor, a couple of calves thrust their heads out of the window and gazed at me inquiringly. A glance told me that whatever refreshment that caravansary might afford for beast, it had none for man, and I went on.

I saw some stalwart rows of corn growing in what had once been the street, and tried to picture them a regiment of soldiers ready for action.

An eerie feeling, as if I were surrounded by ghosts, came over me.

Open fields were decidedly to be preferred, I thought, to deserted cities,

But just then I caught sight of a thin line of smoke from the chimney of a house farther up the road.

"Some one lives here, after all," I said to myself.

I saw that the house bore some signs of occupancy.

A chair stood on the porch at just that distance from the wall which permits its being tilted back at an angle inviting to a smoker,

The windows in the lower part were intact, and a clog lay sleeping in the doorway. I rapped loudly on the floor with my stick, and in response a man appeared in the entrance.

He was short and bowed, and had a curious one-sided limp as he walked. His long white hair hung in curls about his face, giving him a singularly juvenile look. His keen black eyes regarded me with some curiosity, but no fear or astonishment. He held out his hand, and in answer to my explanation of my presence invited me to enter.

His voice had something of the harsh sound of a long-unused flute.

"You're quite a ways from anywhere's else, and I guess you can stay here if you want to," he went on, as he led the way inside. The room was dusky, but I could distinguish a table drawn before the window. Upon this my host placed a plate and bowl, remarking as he did so:

"I didn't build no extra fire to-night, but I can give you some bread and milk if you can eat it." I assented at once, adding that the air of Pennsylvania had a marvelous effect upon a jaded New York city appetite.

He sat near me while I ate, and when I had finished, rose remarking:

"I don't burn a light much summer evenings, and it's pleasanter out on the stoop."

He gave me the one chair, and seated himself on the floor. I offered him my cigar-case, but he refused, saying, "I never held much by them cannons; I like my old pipe best."

"I grow my own leaf in a little garden patch," he went on as we lighted up.

"Seems to be a city about here?" I said after a few puffs.

"Was once," he said, sententiously.

"I am the only one left now, though."

"What place is it?" I questioned.

He mentioned a name known to every oil speculator in the country twenty years ago. "This the place?" I gasped.

"You wouldn't hardly believe it, would you? There was a big fire not long after the boom died out, and as most folks had moved away, there wa'n't nobody to fight it, and it took a good deal of the town."

"I always felt thankful this house was spared. I was born here and so was all my children, and I guess I'll die here."

"Then you lived here before the boom?" I inquired.

"Why, it was over there in my south hill pasture that they first struck the ile. There was two farms here where the buildings stand now. I hain't never forgot the day the first well spouted up. Charlie—he jumped on my gray mare 'Jen' and just made her fly over to Titusville with the news."

"I suppose they paid you a good price for the farm?" I remarked,

"No-o; I didn't sell," he hesitated. "Charlie—that's my son—he was all for havin' me take part interest in the ile that was found. Well, I didn't exactly like to sell the old homestead nuther. I don't own only just the house now; the rest of the town was sold for taxes a spell ago—brought \$1,200. A farmer back in the country bought it."

Presently he rose and hobbled into the house. I heard him moving about for a and then he called to me.

"I have made up a bed for you on the settee; it is the best I can do for you to-night, and I will leave the candle on the table."

"Don't forget 'to blow it out,'" he called again as I entered the house, and I heard no more of him that night.

The next morning I rose late, and the sun was well up when I stepped out on the veranda.

My host of the night before was nowhere in sight, but a frugal breakfast was arranged on the table.

After eating I strolled out and took my way toward that quarter of the town that I had noticed as I sat smoking the evening before. I passed the ruin of a church built of brick in an ugly ornate style; behind it lay the cemetery, and as I ap-

proached I saw a figure crouched before a grave. I marked the bunch of fresh wild-flowers placed upon the smooth green turf and hastily withdrew.

When I made my way later back to the house, I found my friend seated on the porch with his pipe as on the evening before.

He greeted me in a friendly manner, and after a moment's silence, said:

"I saw you up to the graveyard when I was there?"

"Yes."

"I was glad you did not speak to me. It kind o' seems to me when I am up there that they ain't far away, and sometimes I think I can hear 'em talking to me."

He had laid down his pipe and his eyes were fixed on the distant hills.

"They all went to once, stranger. It was only six weeks from the time Charlie died till Lydia went, and her mother couldn't live without her."

"Then you had two children," I said.

"Only two, and there never was such children before. Some folks said my son was drunk when he was drowned, but it was a lie—a lie, sir!" He struck the post fiercely. "It happened this way," he said as he grew calmer.

"He went out with Fred Alton on the river one evening—Fred was going to marry Liddy. They said he was drunk, and maybe he was, but Charlie wasn't. Well, next morning we found the boat bottom side up, and then they found the bodies that evenin'. Liddy didn't ever get over it. She just pined away, and in six weeks she was put beside the boys up there on the hill. Mother wa'n't long to follow, and then I was alone and I been alone ever since. It wasn't long before the wells dried up and folks moved away. I told 'em I should never go, so I have stayed on. I saved money enough to buy the house and the ground it stands on, but all the rest went."

It seemed like a dream to sit there listening to the old man's story while my eyes wandered about the deserted town.

The city of the living called me from this city of the dead. The old man kindly bade me farewell, and refused the money for my lodging; I laid it on the chair and walked away.

I turned at a bend in the street and looked back. A bowed figure was toiling up the hill toward the cemetery.