

## AN AUTUMN EVENING.

By F. E. ROSS.

A CALM, grey afternoon during that brief season when Nature, like an aged man serenely waiting for Death, lies in quiet expectation of the approaching winter's sleep. A level place at the meeting of several paths, near a tarn in the heart of the mountains; a weather-worn finger-post, and a rough shelter of stone walls built in the form of a cross. The air is still; the grey clouds hang in long motionless horizontal masses, covering the whole sky save one narrow band of pale yellow above the Northern horizon. The surface of the tarn, unbroken by the smallest ripple, reflects a clear, unwavering picture of the surrounding hills; the very streams are hushed. A vague suspense broods over mountain and valley, lake and river. A feeling of inertia, which can be dispelled only by active movement, creeps around the senses. The distant lakes appear dull, grey and unreal—like holes torn in a picture of green fields and dark brown woods. An occasional gleam of pale sunlight, struggling weakly through the canopy of cloud, warms the flanks of the distant hills into a dull russet; except for this their prevailing tint is a cold, uniform grey. Nearer at hand the green-carpeted dales are fringed with sombre woods of bronze, and above these, creeping up the bare hill-sides and around the crumbling crags and boulders which protrude from the slopes, are patches of bracken, coloured like clean, dull copper. A great precipice, dark and forbidding, frowns over the tarn—its summit vague in the mist, its face split into pinnacled towers and turreted bastions by deep ravines and chasms.

As evening comes, the clouds sink lower till the hill-tops are buried and the valleys covered in as with a rafted ceiling. A spark of light far away below shines out of the deepening twilight where a village stands in the midst of



green meadows at the foot of the valley ; and beyond, between the shadowy hills, a spectral cloud of mist lies on the bosom of an unseen lake.

The twilight is fast fading into night. In the deep shade of the mountain-side looms a vast door-like chasm with a lintel of cloud, profoundly cavernous, filled and over-flowing with the uttermost blackness of darkness—the very portal of Erebus and Nox. On every side vague dark shapes appear—dwindle—and vanish ; shadows become rocks—rocks melt into shadows. Dry land turns into water under foot. Everything is unreal, intangible, ghostly. Distant objects seem near, and near ones distant. Is that a figure seated there—some Ophelia with long white garments trailing in the stream ? It is but the gleam of falling and broken water. Whence came that long-drawn sigh ? It was but the whisper of the air among the bracken.

The blackness which seemed to be pouring like dense smoke out of the great Portal has now spread over all the mountains around. The sky is but little less dark, and progress has become a mere blind, downward stumbling, guided only by the star in the village. The gloom deepens as the ground sinks between the hills, but the descent gradually becomes less steep and stony as the valley widens. Presently the noise of stumbling footsteps ceases. Soft turf is underfoot ; still, leafless trees overhead. In the intense stillness of the night, a man's voice sings softly—

“ Peace breathes along the shade  
Of every hill ;  
The tree-tops of the glade  
Are hush'd and still ;  
All woodland murmurs cease,  
The birds to rest within the brake are gone.”

The lodestar in the village shines near and bright now. As the little church in the fields is passed, with its grey belfry rising just above the tops of the black yew-trees, and a new tomb gleaming between their stems, the voice is singing—

“ Be patient, weary heart,—anon  
Thou too shalt be at peace !”