

A LEGEND OF THE MAMMOTH CAVE.

BY SALLIE M. BRYAN.

There's an enchanted palace in the earth,
And poets, who have dreamed there, say 'tis worth
Their wreaths of laurel, and of love, to stand
Within this subterranean fairy-land.

The moss-grown portal of this magic cave
Will 'mind the shuddering fancy of the grave;
For like a type of death itself, the air,
Cold, cold and dark and silent hovers there.
But, when the dreary threshold has been past,
The scene beyond, strange, splendid, calm and vast,
Startles the spirit's gaze, as it were given
For an imperfect metaphor of Heaven.

And here, to break consumption's ghastly spell,
A sweet young stranger, crewlike, came to dwell.
His dark cheeks wore the tropic blood's warm dyes,
The tropic fire flashed in his dusky eyes,
And, pictured there, by memory's faithful art,
The tropic world was glowing in his heart. * *

"This air is haunted, yet I do not fear,
The Phantom of the South has long been here,
Mocking my faded cheek and tearful eyes
With sunny light o'erflowing wide blue skies,
Gold prints half-hid in perfumed orange-groves,
And radiant birds that rain the blessed loves
Of their wild hearts, in gushing, music-showers,
O'er wind-kissed roses and magnolia flowers,
But—there's another Phantom here to-day—
And I must follow it—away—away"

He rose with weary languor to explore
This maze of mystic loveliness once more,
This place whose still, bewildering beauty seems
The scenery of a lotus-eater's dreams.
White roses, lilies, which nor fade nor change,
Whose silent bells hang delicate and strange,
Were there in charmed wreaths, and as he past
The kiss he gave them trembled like the last.
He reached a lake, o'er which perchance there floats
The rosy sail of fairy pleasure-boats,
And bent above it, while these mournful words
Swelled from his heaving bosom's breaking chords:

"There is a voice in Echo River,
A Voice I never heard till now;
More faintly do my heart-strings quiver
More fiercely burn my brain and brow,
And faster come the memories flying
From the sweet forest of my birth,
For I—oh God! must die—am dying—
An exile from the glad, green earth.
They brought me buds and flowers last even
And told me it was summer there—
Summer on stream and vale and Heaven
And summer in the sunny air.

"Home of my childhood, where my Mother
Taught me to hush Our Father's name;
Woods, in whose shade my dark-eyed brother
Told me his poet-dreams of fame—
He wears a wreath—but ere he'd given
The laurel's price—a broken heart—
Thank God, the Amaranth blooms of Heaven
Were twined for him by angel-art.
And bower, where in the twilight's closes
The dreamy music used to swell
From my guitar, among the roses—
And thou, sweet cave—farewell—farewell."

His friends came near. Half-breathless, pale, amazed,
Each at the other in mute terror gazed:

"Yes—he is dying," one found voice to say,
But gasped the words, and shuddering turned away,
"Hal! Death?" the other muttered in affright,
"That giant victor—he whose awful might,
Even on the broad, bright earth, the bravest fear
Oh, God of Heaven! I cannot see him *here*."
And so, they fled, those coward-things. * *

"They're gone,
And I am left to wrestle with—alone—
That which they thought too dread to look upon."
Then, suddenly his wandering mind flew far:
"Alas, or Southern bird, or breeze or star
Are things for me to envy now," he said.
"For she, the early-loved, the early dead,
Sleeps where these sing and smile, but I no more
May weep above thy hushed heart—*Leonore!*"

He ceased, enchanted, for there glided by
*A shape that wore the glory of the sky
Around the beauty of the earth.* As bright
As to the rapt Italian's poet sight,
The one who for a mortal lover's view,
Unveiled Eternity and led him through—
Seemed she who from the realms beyond the grave
Bent o'er this dying stranger of the cave:
"*Edgar—oh, Edgar!* In an Empire where
All is undying, and divinely fair,
'Mid countless legions of eternal things
With forms of beauty and resplendent wings
To bear them where far glories flash and burn
I have been almost lonely. Ay, I'd turn,
In Paradise, from all the anthems there
To listen to thy voice sent up in prayer.
And when, to-night, we heard thy gasping breath
And saw thy hour of change approaching—I
Grew jealous of our beautiful angel Death,
And came myself to take thee to the sky."

Along the galleries of that shadowy place,
Each with a beating heart and pallid face,
Men hurried wildly. Oh, how strange a sight
Appalled them soon! The dim and solemn light
Of many torches flashed and wavered there
And shed a blue mist on the lonesome air
And the intense of silence seemed to weigh
Upon the very spirit—but he lay
Within those awful solitudes *alone*
And white and rigid as the burial-stone.
The dew of death was frozen on his brow,
Where heavy curls lay, damp and tangled now,
And those calm, glorious eyes, once like the night,
Deep, dark, yet tender with a starry light,
Though dim and fixed and vacant, seemed to wear
For them a desolate, reproachful stare.
Yet on his lip, as lovely as crewlike,
Lingered the faithful shadow of a smile,
Which smile itself, upon a spirit's kiss,
Had gone to brighten in the Infinite bliss.