

THE OLD MATHEMATICIAN.

FROM MARSCHALK MANOR.

SOME years ago a very eccentric old gentleman suddenly appeared in a little Dutch hamlet near the river. The arrival of a stranger in a small village is always attended with some degree of notoriety, but in this case the sensation was prodigious, for the new comer was soon discovered to have a character not only unlike, but exceedingly remote from that of any one else in the place.

"Who can he be?" was the immediate cry. Some suggested that he was a man of business with a stock of new-fashioned goods, come to awaken covetous susceptibilities in the hearts of the hitherto contented townsmen, and thereby make his own individual fortune. Terrified at the conjecture, Old Hans Gansvoort, the only trader in the village, immediately lowered sugar a stiver and soap half a stiver, by way of showing that he was the man who was willing to ruin himself in honorable competition, rather than have his place of mercantile distinction usurped by a stranger. But the next day, finding his suspicions groundless, he raised every article to its original standard, and, in a praiseworthy spirit of forgiveness, sent round to the new-comer to solicit his custom.

In like manner were the doctor, the schoolmaster, and the publican grievously alarmed for their several interests, and in a similar way manifested the same Christian spirit upon being relieved from their trepidation, but all in vain. The old gentleman kept very close, and answered none of the appeals which were made to him. He had brought with him a sufficient stock of groceries to last for many months, was never sick, had no children and manifested no inclination for tavern gossip; so that there was no such thing as getting at him, and the whole village was still at fault.

Was he a farmer? He had but a little garden, scarcely sufficient for the production of his own corn and potatoes. Was he a gentleman? He dressed well, appeared rich, and had a good seat in church, but exhibited an unusual repugnance to making any acquaintances in the neighborhood. Even the Squire, upon visiting him with hospitable intent, met with such a cold reception, that he was fain to go away, with his self-consequence marvelously diminished, and with something that sounded very much like an oath painfully struggling up his inflated larynx.

Who was he? What was he? Where did he come from? Where was he going to? How long was he going to stay? Was he single or married? Was he husband or widower?

The sensation redoubled. All the town was agog. In the excitement of ungratified curiosity, the Publican, for once in his life, drew forth good measure, and the Schoolmaster gave the boys a New Year holiday in the middle of summer; while the Dominie and the Doctor went many times a week to visit a sick man, whom they had never before thought fit to honor with their presence, doing so, simply because the way led past the stranger's secluded abode. From continual lounging at the tavern after news, more toppers were made in one week than in months before; while among the elder maidens tea-parties increased to a marvellous extent. Even the village dogs acquired a habit of lying in the road directly before the stranger's door, waiting with open jaws and distended tongues to snap up any chance piece of information, and bear it to their masters.

At last, however, the whole truth came out, for the stranger was visited by a nephew, a bright frolicsome lad of sixteen, more mischievous than studious, and who, seeing no reason for secrecy, told all about his worthy uncle to the first eager questioner.

The old man was a celebrated mathematician, who had spent all his life in investigating the abstruse science, and would probably plod on in the same fascinating pursuit till the day of his death. He had a larger library of big black vellum books than the Dominie and Doctor together could muster,—always wore round his neck a silver medal given by some long extinguished mathematical club, in honor of having, after only fifteen years of laborious study, solved an exceedingly intricate equation, of which no one had ever heard, or, in all human probability, ever would

hear,—and moreover, was a corresponding member of four Mathematical Associations and one Royal Mathematical Institute.

Then reports of the old gentleman's learning spread apace. It was said that he could count the stars, compute eclipses, weigh the earth, and do many other things then considered as bordering on the wonderful. By and by some bold spirit whispered strange doubts as to the equal intellectual capacities of the Dominie and Schoolmaster, which, when these two worthies heard, they put on their cocked hats, took their canes in hand, and, with a visible spirit of jealousy, sallied forth to match their powers with those of the wonderful mathematician. He puzzled the first with an algebraic equation: an arithmetical proportion effectually bothered the second; and the two departed no wiser than before, and very much crest-fallen, to boot. After that, the mathematician was very generally let alone; for his retired disposition attracted no fellow communication, and the the fame of his talents had so spread abroad, that he was looked upon with a deep degree of reverence, which would not admit of friendly sociability. If he had lived with the bats in an angle of some lofty stone turret, worn big spectacles, and cultivated a flowing white beard, carried a human skull under his left arm, and had had all the signs of the zodiac embroidered upon the back of his coat, he could scarcely have been the object of greater awe.

He was in truth a singular specimen. Every idea he had was of a mathematical tendency. All his thoughts were a curious compound of sines and tangents, roots and equations. He even carried his fantasies into every operation of common life, thereby often causing a ludicrous effect.

For relaxation he cultivated a little piece of ground, which, for regularity and exactness of proportion, in course of time became a capital model for a Chinese mandarin's garden. All the trees were trimmed off into spheres and cones, while his vines, instead of being allowed to follow their natural bent, were rudely trained up in exact parallels. The consequence was, that neither trees nor vines ever bore any fruit, which was, however, a matter of very little moment to the mathematician, who felt it sufficient compensation for any such loss, to observe his favorite study thus accurately pictured forth to the eye.

Then the grass-plot was a marvel to the whole surrounding

country. The sight wandered over a vast area of circles, squares, triangles and parallelograms. There was not a bush which did not represent a centre; not a line of cabbages or cresses which was not planted to form a radius or secant. And, in particular, the pride of the whole garden was a huge ellipse. It was formed by a close row of corn, which, for the purpose of illustration, was kept with all its natural exuberances so closely cropped, that it never ventured to bear a single kernel. This was scientifically bisected and dissected by such a vast variety of chords, tangents, secants, parabolas, that the whole theory of conic sections was spread out as a map. Not the minutest particular was wanting to give the design completeness.

The mathematician was a man of even temper in most things. He could bear ill-made beds, cold coffee and partially washed clothes, without a murmur; but let any one venture to assail any thing connected with his favorite science, and the sleeping lion was immediately aroused. Once a straggling visitor, gifted with more curiosity than common sense, appeared to examine his valued silver medal with extraordinary interest. Pleased with the attention, the mathematician detailed the whole history of the honored token, and was proceeding by a trifling digression, to impart the various steps in science by which he made the wonderful discovery that entitled him to it, when the guest inconsiderately inquired its intrinsic cost. In a moment, the enraged mathematician caught him by his collar, and by a series of well adjusted kicks, landed him safely outside in the road.

"Well done, Uncle!" said the nephew, clapping his hands as he saw the luckless victim many times raised into the air, before having fairly alighted from the last impulse.

"A very fair illustration of ricochet motion;" the mathematician replied.

After a while the nephew left the house in order to travel in foreign lands. The mathematician first handed him a well filled bag of gold, as though it were a gift scarcely worth being thankful for, and then, with great ceremony and some severe struggles of the soul, produced a little black well-thumbed work upon "*fluxions*."

"Take this, my boy, I can well spare it, for I have another copy. Read it well, and it will make you a better and a wiser man."

But the only approach which the nephew ever made to the study of any kind of mathematics was to blow forth circles of smoke from his pipe, and it was strongly suspected, that the tobacco therein was lit up, day after day, with successive leaves from the little black book.

Once the Squire of the village, recovering from his wrath, endeavored to carry off the mathematician upon a fishing expedition. For this purpose he rushed into the house, and found him deeply engaged over a slate.

"Come, my old boy, away with study and take a little practice in throwing the line!"

"You wish to know what is a line?" said the mathematician, looking up abstractedly. "It is length without breadth or thickness, as demonstrated by—"

"No, no! Pshaw! Go with me, and we will each take a rod and—"

"Forty rods, one rood:—Four roods, one—"

"Stop!" said the Squire, growing very red in the face,—
"Hang it, man, do you know what it means to angle?"

"Aye; as the angle A is to the angle B, so is the square of the hypotenuse of the opposite side to the length of a bisecting chord formed by —"

The Squire waited to hear no more, but rushed despairingly out of the house, while the mathematician continued his work, without remembering that he had had a visitor at all.

At last the old mathematician went the way of all flesh. There was no preliminary sickness, but he was found sitting up in his chair *dead*, with his slate before him covered with closely written figures. The whole village rushed to see him, and among the crowd came the Dominie and the Schoolmaster. They scanned the slate attentively, and though neither could comprehend the simplest equation of the whole confused conglomerated mass, each felt bound to give an opinion. The Schoolmaster pretended to discover at the end a triumphant and satisfactory answer to the problem, and hence argued that the mathematician had died in an excess of joy at having his labor crowned with success. The Dominie, on the contrary, proved by several long words of indisputable incomprehensibility, that the result was *wrong*, and that hence the mathematician had died of grief. The

only effect of the argument was to raise a deadly feud between the Church and School, which was never fairly made up.

The nephew came home from his travels in time to read the will, and order the funeral. The mathematician left him sole heir to every thing, binding up the possession of the valued books and papers with every security that law could afford, as though he had feared lest others might venture to dispute the precious heritage. In a codicil of six lines, the other property was made over, unclouded by any legal ingenuities; as though mere gold and silver were of too little worth to demand much precaution in their bestowal.

The grave and coffin were made of the most mathematical proportions, and the funeral took place in the midst of a great concourse, many of whom almost expected to see the learned man rise up from the bier, and fly off to the realms of space, striding a comet. But no such result happened. The mathematician lay quietly in the grave, with his medal on his breast, and the nephew departed with the old man's gold and silver, leaving the books and manuscripts to the mercy of the rats and mice.

SKETCH OF PETRARCH.

BY REV. ROBERT TURNBULL.

WHEN Dante was banished from Florence, Petracco dell An-
cisa, a noble Florentine and notary of the Republic, was involved
in the same calamity. He was the father of the celebrated
Petrarch, who was born in Arezzo on the 19th of July, 1304, on
the very night when Dante Petracco and other Ghibellines made
their last ineffectual attempt on Florence. A striking incident in
the life of Petrarch, connected with that event is thus versified by
Rogers. Referring to the Arno, which glides in many beautiful
windings, through the Val de Pisa,