



### INTER'S FIRST FOOTSTEPS.

WHAT a nut-sweet healthiness there is about Robert Louis Stevenson! How different he is from our decadent *fin de siècle* minor poets. It has been a pleasant task to watch through even one changing fortnight the truth of those words of his—

“To make this earth our hermitage,  
A cheerful and a changeful page,  
God's bright and intricate device,  
Of days and seasons doth suffice.”

How much of joy there is in the contrast alone. It seemed in summer as though all one needed for perfect contentment was to lie on the warm grass under the great fir, to pluck the tiny wild yellow flowers of the lady's bed-straw, and look dreamily at the blue haze over the distant landscape as one watched the afternoon sun bringing out the rich time-worn brown of that beautiful Somerset tower that is the gem of the middle distance.

And yet what a store of sensations there was within the very same quiet scene. No white mountains are needed whose tops the sun gilds, no mysterious lakes, or rocky valleys, all the power of nature can be really put forth in this quiet pastoral landscape, for its face can alter to express her every mood.

There is a resinous bracing scent that comes as we walk across the turf soft with dew, and smell the damp leaves. A Londoner, accustomed to enjoy the bright and gleaming blues in his Brett's sea-pieces in the Academy or to gloat over summer's wealth poured out in warm reds and deep blue in a Kent sketch by Mrs. Allingham, would hardly believe what subtle play of colour there is in these first winter tints. When

W. J. Morgan

is the green ever so vivid as in these moist mornings where the sun lights up but does not scorch? What a marriage it is of colours that are not often seen in harmony, when the far elms look purple, steel-purple against the emerald of that strip of field. The bare twigs are moist with dew, and the shade of filmy purple is so delicate that Turner's brush alone could paint it. It is a puzzle to tell why the sprouting grass that comes before the second journey of the plough, should carpet the low field with a lovely bluish green, and be a brighter tint by the hedge-side. So it is, and one leaves the farmer to tell the reason, and longs for Boughton or Marcus Stone to paint that blue-green they like so well. The three great brown horses that drag the plough belong of rights to the perfection of the picture.

Another day begins, and the same scene wears a different face. The coppice away eastwards to the left of the highway is a harmony of copper and brown with a brighter yellow in the near oak, and behind some tender lingering green. A great tree in front stretches out its arms with soft ebony hues and recalls a great road-side crucifix seen long years ago on a Bavarian hill-side as the train steamed past to Nuremberg.

Before the sun set the scene was flooded with amber which changed to gold and the gold to rose, and the deep-blue solemn cloud-curtains melted to purple, and as the sun touched the horizon a little boat of lavender-frayed cloud ventured across the disc till one remembered—

"God has a few of us whom He whispers in the ear,  
The rest may reason and welcome 'tis we musicians know."

Soon after, the laurels in the hedge-row bed looked quite squalid through the window-pane, but the memory of the sunset remained.

A week later, and what a different world it is. All the sun-light is gone. The wind sweeps round the house in long sighs like the pain that comes when unkindness takes the place of love. The great boughs of the trees bend and sway as the wind passes through them like some messenger of woe to scatter sorrow and then pass relentlessly on: the spirits of the storm, who, so thought Telemachus, had carried away Odysseus, and made him for ever inglorious among men.

"*ἄν δέ μιν ἀκλειῶς ἄρπυιαι ἀνηρείψαντο.*"

Another week passes and the face of the fields has a new expression. The heavy rain that came, with intervals of glistening steel-grey skies, soaked into the earth, so that when the sunlight came again the ploughed fields had lost their dark puce-colour and had soft tones of lavender and pink and warm slate grey where the sunlight transformed them. The walnut-tree in front of the beech with its few bright last leaves, stretches out its twisted arms thick with pale green lichens so that it has a hoary look of premature old. The monotonous laurels that make the garden-hedge above the road were very dull and dusty in the heavy summer-days. Pro-

bably Swinburne was thinking of the historic bay and not the common laurel when he said—

"Laurel is green for a season, and love is sweet for a day,  
But love grows bitter with treason, and laurel outlasts not May."

And yet the vivid green, the short-lasting white blossoms in May, and the bitter essence of the modern shrub (the common laurel was first sent to Europe in 1576 by His Excellency David Ungnad, Ambassador from the Emperor of Germany at Constantinople, to Clusius at Vienna), almost seem to point to it as the nearer to the thought of the poet. Its beauty did indeed seem gone in the July heats, but now that the elms above the hedge are

"Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sung,"

the laurels have another kind of beauty, and they fit the winter better than the spring. The rain has made them shine, and their spear-shaped leaves are very keen and clear against the dark bare hedgerow across the road.

Love and laurel may not always match the may-time, but sometimes a bitter strain is conquered into flavour instead of sourness.

Browning sees deeper into love than Swinburne, and one turns again and again to his lines in Paracelsus:—

"... love not serenely pure,  
But strong from weakness, like a chance-sown plant

Which cast on stubborn soil, puts forth strange buds

And softer stains unknown in happier climes;

Love which endures and doubts and is oppressed,

And cherished, suffering much and much sustained,

And blind, oft-failing yet believing love,  
A half-enlightened, often chequered trust."

Perhaps sorrow gives as tender touches to lives as the soft rains do to these fields at the year's latter end. The plough has gone deep into that far field, but how lovely are the tiny tufts of random grass it puts out, quite unheeding of the frosts that will come and nip.

Desdemona comes to our mind, and all her furtive little acts of love to Othello, spite of the harrow that had made such furrows in her tender heart,

"Unkindness may do much,"

she says to Emilia,

"And his unkindness may defeat my life,  
But never taint my love."

How lovely those bare banches of the trees are in spite of being "bare ruined choirs;" perhaps they have the same worth that belongs to ruined walls and towers of Tintern, which Westminster Abbey with its pews and hymn-books and vergers is sometimes felt to want.

They let one see so much *through* them of the earth and the hills and the sunset, so that they are strangely akin to spiritual things, and set one musing more than dusty leaves.

"Grant that we may so pass *through* things temporal that we lose not the things eternal," for there was no limiting "finally" in the original version.

The old masters used to make a great study of the stems of trees. Even when they had their leaves on them they painted them with more care and insight than the moderns do. Who does not remember the *serried ranks* of the tree-trunks in Bellini's "Death of Peter Martyr" in the National Gallery. They form such a contrast to the passion and speed of the murderous onslaught, their deep-rooted stillness enforces the pity and terror of the spectacle in the foreground.

And in another of the world's great pictures—Holman Hunt's "Light of the World"—how the trees haunt the memory, the trees that slope in age and decay in that orchard of the soul which is the background to the Saviour knocking at the door. These trees have few sere leaves of late autumn, and are trees seen at night. How ghostly are the sloping stems in the moonlight.

In our quiet landscape we see just such an orchard beyond the church and between us and the faint blue trails of smoke from the village chimneys, so clear in the cold air. Perhaps it is later autumn now than that scene painted in the Worcester Park orchard. Beyond them is a bright withy-bed almost cinnamon-coloured against their black trunks, instead of the sluggish river; but none the less, they bring to our minds the immortal orchard ground of the great picture.

The orchard lies westward, and the setting sun sends sloping rays through those low stems of the apple-trees, with their mystical mediæval look that tell of the fruit of Eve.

"... of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste Brought death into the world and all our woe."

How can they be otherwise than full of mystery when the world's poetry is interwoven in their gnarled stems, the world's religions steeped in the romance of them, dear to the Greeks as the trees of the garden of the Hesperides, to the Hebrews as the trees of the garden of Eden.

"Ah, lady, we receive but what we give,  
And in our life alone does nature live."

Yes, Coleridge was right, and it is the human associations that hang around these quiet fields

"the still sad music of humanity,"

that makes a Wessex orchard full of pleasant and lovely wealth for simple people, so that as we look on it we seem to feel that

"Something far more deeply interfused  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting  
suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky and in the mind of  
man."

CLOTILDA MARSON.

