

Bright soul! beloved best of best and wise,
 True-hearted woman of the dauntless eyes
 That looked on death without dismay, and saw
 The future dawning with abated awe,
 A little while a sylvan thou shalt dwell
 In silent chambers of the woodland fell,
 But no long time; already to thy sense
 The calm is perfect that we saw commence
 Ere the last breath had left thy lip, the while
 Heaven's light seemed breaking on that parting smile;
 And we believe that, sure as June will bring
 Blossoms and bees and all the race that sing,
 In God's good season, such a love as thine
 Must vindicate its love in courts divine,
 Strong in those words that all resembling thee
 Shall one day hear — "Ye did it unto me."

Thomas William Parsons.

A SUMMER HOLINIGHT.

WE are accustomed to speak of darkness as negation, of the night as a usurper; but a fair arbitration never yet gave the award of priority to day. Our mortality deals with the day; our immortality with the night. Why not try to regain some of the privileges of citizenship in this oldest of Saturnian kingdoms?

Night will be friendly to thee: ask a boon. There is a flavor of novelty in the idea of holding a vigil which shall be neither penitential nor scientific, nor yet in the nature of a municipal watch or military bivouac—a vigil to spy out the mysterious ways of the night, to listen, as an eavesdropper, at the door of her council-chamber. I recall with pleasure certain nights of the past summer spent in this unsecular enterprise.

The day springs; so also does the night. Our common expression, nightfall, is an inversion of the truth. The chalice of the evening air has its marked degrees showing the gradual rise of the shadow. Already the forest hedge of the horizon is submerged; the low-lying strata of sunset vapors are changed to the color of a smoldering ember; but directly overhead there is still a region of unmingled daylight—fluid sapphire with some few dissolving pearls of floating cloud. Through this translucent element the latest lingering birds take their flight, dropping down into some convenient tree when finally overtaken by dusk. Innumerable happy hints and allusions occur to the imagination during the long reign of the summer twilight. Given a bright sunset field to work upon, what heraldic conceits, what compositions of the Doré order, can be traced in the old earth's irregular profile! Every evening I observe yonder, on the brow

of the hill, a devout Benedictine leaning on his staff, repeating what *aves* and *paternosters* I know not. Whoever intrudes upon the ghostly father's orisons discovers for his pains only the torso of an old tree in a hood and capote of ivy. Along the hill-slope a hobble-dehoy dance of gnarled saplings is in progress. The feathery crowns of the dandelion rising above the cropped grass of the pasture figure, in this crepuscular comedy, as a service of astral lamps set to light the midsummer-night frolics of the little people. They have also the small, uncertain taper of the firefly. This taper, as though held in the invisible hand of some spirit of the underwood, goes searching along the grass, up through the trees, and now into the sky, as if piqued to discover what relationship the stars bear to its own phosphorescent atom. Nature is tender of fireflies, and only on fit nights allows them to be on parade. If the air has any asperity about it, not a firefly is to be seen.

In the nights bordering on the summer solstice, the boundaries of twilight are not easily defined. There is always a faint flush, or aurora, above the northern horizon, and by a little past two o'clock there is a very perceptible hint of dawn. It might be said that the after-glow of yesterday mingled with the "forlorn hope" of to-morrow. This scarcely intermittent twilight serves to remind us of our distance from the equator, and suggests, too, that our next neighbor under the Pole Star is the land of the Midnight Sun. Those who have lived in tropical countries say that the gloom, or opacity, there observable in the northern heavens often gave them a strange feeling of isolation and homesickness.

Who, though never so watchful, could see the appearing of a star? Without the least premonitory sparkle, a "new planet swims into his ken," but the exact instant of discovery can never be gauged. Once seen, it seems to have been shining from eternity. The first star of the evening is Arcturus,—“the beauty crest of summer weather,”—said to be, of all stars in the northern hemisphere, the one nearest the earth. If so, I understand the earnest scrutiny in which it seems to hold our planet. There are localities among the constellations specially fancied by the poets, regions of almost historic association. One such favorite haunt is Ariadne's Crown. In the old drama, the hero, expecting immediate execution at the hand of the tyrant, takes this leave of his wife :

“My Dorigen,
Yonder, above, 'bout Ariadne's Crown,
My spirit shall hover for thee.”

By night the concavity of the sky is much more pronounced than by day. The heavens are spread above us as a vast dome, gallery on gallery, transept and arch and recesses for the choirs of silence sunk in the mysterious mid-distances of the firmament. At first the celestial perspective appears overcrowded; star jostles star; beams become inter-knit and involved in a sort of metropolitan maze. Gradually the eye recovers from its perplexity; it becomes a measurer of interstellar space, a resolver of nebulae, a connoisseur of infinitudes.

The sun is a despotism, the stars are a republic of light: it is better to live under a republic than under a despotism. Any allusion to the stars, either on a printed page or in the text of the orator, always brings a sense of freedom and sublimity. Any nation that claims to enjoy their tutelary regard has an heroic task to make good its boast of liberty. Have the stars aught to do with human destinies? We have seen them consenting, denying, admonitory, reminiscent, prophetic. They also lend themselves to any vagary in the mind of the gazer, so that no conclusion can be drawn as to their independent “influence.”

The moon should be tried for witchcraft, as possibly she has been at some crazy assize of mediæval judicature. That she has undergone an *auto da fe*, has been burned for her sorceries, has not diminished her wizard potentiality; the present night is as full of her enchantments as when Medea gathered poison herbs under her approving light. No blame to the primitive husbandman if, firm in his belief that there was “something in the moon,” he planted, or withheld his hand, according to her instructions.

If we admit a tidal impulse in the world of

waters, why not admit as well that the clod feels a similar drawing moonward? There is a tremulous agitation of the leaves, a wilder rumor in the air, when late in the night the rim of the moon gleams above the dark horizon.

“O Moon! the oldest shades 'mong oldest trees
Feel palpitations when thou lookest in:
O Moon! old boughs lisp forth a holier din,
The while they feel thine airy fellowship.
Thou dost bless everywhere with silver lip,
Kissing dead things to life.”

I do not find the night as devoid of color as is frequently represented; nor will we have our nocturne a monochromatic piece. “Brown” is the adjective most commonly pressed into service by the old-time poets to characterize the complexion of the night. But the night is not brown; at least, we recognize the umber medium, and looking through and beyond it receive from all objects distinct notice of their local daylight color—nature still plainly wearing the green mantle. A difference, however, is to be noted in the unlike effects of moonlight on various leaf surfaces. The foliage of the maple and the elm shows little definition of masses, seeming rather to absorb than to radiate the light, while that of the peach and the pear tree presents a fine polished surface and outline. The leaves of the poplar, stirred by a breath imperceptible elsewhere, look like innumerable small, oval mirrors, constantly shifting to reflect at all angles the lunar majesty. The corn-field seems the repository of all the scythes and sickles that have reaped the summer meadows,—lodged here to be reannealed in moonbeams and whetted into new keenness.

The moon is shorn of half her pageantry on the earth if the dew is not there to coöperate. Moonlight and dew! Is there, or do we only fancy it, an iridescence arising from their union? I am loth to tread on the grass, lest I should destroy the starry system suspended on its blades.

At night the air carries a heavier freight of woody and vegetable odors than during the hours of sunlight; the breeze advises us of a new orient, or Spice Islands, discovered in the familiar latitude of our fields, bringing the scent of blossoming clover and grain. Brushing along some tangled border, we guess “in embalmed darkness” that the milkweed is in bloom, though its perfume bears a reminder of spring and the hyacinth. Here also is the evening primrose, whose flower ought to be as dear to the night as the daisy is to the day; and why should there not be a night's-eye on the floral records?

Nor is the night as silent as it is commonly reported, unless it be so accepted on the principle that where there is no ear there is no sound. Even then, one wakeful exception

in a universe of sleepers ought to be sufficient to give acoustic character to the nocturnal void. I found the night, like the cup of Comus, "mixed with many murmurs." First, and the nearest at hand, the lively orchestration of the crickets (the later summer adds the fife of the grasshopper and the castanets of the katydid); then, in the distance, the regular, sonorous, or snoring antiphonies of the frogs at different points along the winding course of the creek. It would not surprise me to learn that these night musicians are systematically governed by the baton and metronome, so well do they keep time in the perplexing fugue movement which they are performing. That note from the thicket is the whip-poor-will's. What in all the vocalities of Nature is there to compare with this voice of the cool and the dusk, this cloistered melodist, who was never yet heard in the profane courts of Day? It is "most musical, most melancholy,"—a not unworthy rival of the English nightingale. Yet, close by the whip-poor-will's covert one hears what might be called the mechanical process of his song—a harsh, unlubricated whir, or rattle, which suggests a laryngean ailment of some sort, as, in the same way, the wild dove's note, heard close by, suggests asthmatic breathing. As to the beetle, though I am not quite sure of having heard his "small but sullen horn," I shall not omit him from the category of nocturnal noise-makers. Like the clumsy, heavy-mailed hoplite that he is, he "sounds as he falls," and crackles in the grass in his efforts to right himself. Under the eaves the boring bee still carries on its carpentry. Rarely a half hour passes that some bird does not sing in its sleep; the swallows twitter in their sooty chimney corner; the robin at intervals declares for morning with a loud vivacious whistle, and the wood pewee sends a long note of inquiry. The falling of an apple in the orchard seems to emphasize the law of gravitation. I notice that any sound of the human voice, any unwonted noise, dropped in the deep well of nightly quiet, produces a rapidly widening circle of murmurous responses and expostulations. From the poultry-yard the night-watch there blows a drowsy *not*, which is repeated successively by all the chanticleers of the neighborhood; the cow lows discontentedly from her paradise of June pasturage; and even the crickets grow more strident. From which I infer that the night keeps a police force in her pay. How do I know what invisible patrols supplement this audible and stationary picket-guard? Beyond all accountable sounds there is always the shadow of a sound,—

"neither here nor there,"—a sound which may be the stir of atmospheric particles, or the hum of noonday activities at the capital of Cathay, or a reminiscence in air of planetary music, or the motion of our own terrestrial car, driving through space—or anything else that fancy pleases to say!

There were some cloudy nights in our calendar, but they were not without suggestion. One such night I remember in June, when the play of heat-lightning was almost continuous. These flashes, or, as they seemed, gusts of light, blowing across dark clouds banked in the horizon, momentarily opened up a magnificent aerial architecture, courts, and corridors, and vistaed interiors, such as Vulcan built for the gods of Olympus. Now and then a star glanced through some loophole in the flying clouds that filled the zenith. A singular interchange of chiaroscuro between cloud and clear sky was produced by the lightning: in the flash, the former stood out in bright relief, while during the interval the sky appeared lightest.

Sometimes I extended my walk along the bank of the creek, where, looking into the water, I could see another Cassiopeia's Chair gently rocking in the nether heavens; or I saw the whole blazing constellation of the Scorpion, with red Antares in its center, reflected in the profound shallow of the stream. What of pearl gulfs, of rivers that yield the diamond? It seemed to me that one might dive or dredge for treasure much nearer home. I listened to the musical falling of the water, and thought how they malign the naiad who say the brook "babbles": to me it uttered only eternal, liquid numbers, eloquently arguing that all streams, no matter through what country they flow, have their common rise in Castaly or Helicon. Would you characterize the suave, deceitful flight of time? It cannot be better compared than to a stream slipping away through the night, unseen, cheating with its ever-present voice.

I surveyed for the true equatorial line dividing darkness and light—the occult and fateful "turn of the night" held in religious awe by familiar tradition; but it is necessary to return again and again to establish the exact place, or rather time, passed through by this imaginary parallel. I often seemed to be traversing the cometary matter of some mortal's dream returning from its fantastic errand; but the dreams I entertained were such as have their entrance by the gate of transparencies.

The moon has begun her hunt down the western woods. Four great stars (like four great evangelists of the light) "flame in the forehead of the morning sky." Our watch is done.