

NOTES ON SCHOOL READERS.

BY THE EDITOR.

*THE DYING SWAN. N. B. Reader III, p. 34.

I do not wonder that people find it hard to teach this poem to young children. It is not likely to attract the pupils. But the teacher should study it until she feels its delicate beauty.

What is the poet presenting to us? A picture, and a very definite one. How easy it would be to paint a picture from this description.

The wide open plain, the gray clouds, the river winding slowly through the marshes with their changing colors of purple and green and yellow. The willows, the creeping weeds and mosses, the desolate pools. Far off, the snow-crowned hills. The only life in the picture is the swallow above and the swan below.

The whole landscape is probably suggested, at least, by the poet's own surroundings. For this is one of his early poems, published in 1830, when Tennyson's home was in Lincolnshire, a flat, marshy region. In the summer time the family often went to Mablethorpe, on the coast, a place referred to in the "Ode to Memory:"

"Or even a lowly cottage whence we see
Stretched wide and wild the waste, enormous marsh.

We are told that "the immense sweep of marsh inland, and the whole weird strangeness of the place greatly moved him."

We may also compare the fourth verse of "Mariana:"

"About a stone-cast from the wall
A sluice with blacken'd waters slept,
And o'er it many, round and small,
The clustered *marsh-mosses* crept.
Hard by a poplar shook alway,
All *silver-green* with gnarled bark;
For leagues no other tree did mark
The *level waste*, the *rounding gray*."

With the first three lines of the second verse, compare the lines from "The Lotos-Eaters."

"Far off, three mountain-tops,
Three silent pinnacles of aged snow."

The children should be told that the common swan of English rivers has no song, and is called the Mute swan, and although there is a species, the Whistling swan, a native of Ireland and northern

Russia, which has musical notes, and comes south in winter, yet the story, so often used by poets, that the swan sings a death song is purely legendary.* Compare,

"like some full-breasted swan
That, fluting a wild carol ere her death,
Ruffles her pure cold plume, and takes the flood
With swarthy webs."

Passing of Arthur.

"An under-roof of doleful gray" and "the under-sky" ought to be explained by the children themselves. Since I have been asked to say what it means, I must explain that it means the clouds; but I should never tell a class such a thing as that.

"It was the middle of the day." Do poets usually state the time of day or year as plainly as this? Collect some examples.

"It was ten of April morn by the chime."
"It was the deep mid-noon."
"Now the noon-day quiet holds the hills."
"It was the time when lilies blow."

"What does "took" mean in

"And took the reed-tops as it went."

And in

"The wild swan's death-hymn took the soul
Of that waste place "with joy."

Compare,

"daffodils
That come before the swallow dares
and take
The winds of March with beauty;"
Winter's Tale, Act iv. Sc. iv.

"To hear the story of your life which must
Take the ear strangely."

Tempest.

And the common expressions,

"It took my eye — my fancy."

"One willow over the river wept." It is easy

*NOTE.— I quote from Mr. Littledale's *Essays on the Idylls*:

"Pliny," says Mr. Dyer, "alludes to a superstition by which swans are said to sing sweetly before their death, but falsely, he tells us, as proved through his own observation. Sir Thomas Browne, in his *Vulgar Errors*, says: "From great antiquity, and before the melody of syrens, the musical note of swans hath been commended, and they sing most sweetly before their death; for thus we read in Plato, that from the opinion of *Metempsychosis*, or transmigration of the souls of men into the bodies of beasts most suitable unto their human condition, after his death Orpheus the musician, became a swan.— *English Folklore*."

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