

THE PASSING OF SUMMER.

POST-SCRIPT.—I know perfectly well, my hyper-critical reader, that the moment your eye catches the word *post-script* you will exclaim:—"A *post-script* at the beginning of an article! What nonsense! Why did he not call it a *preface*?" Exactly; why did I not call it a preface, or a prelude, or a preamble, or a prologue, or a preminium? Simply because it was "written after." "Then why not put it last?" Because I want it read first. I was about to call it a *pre legendum*, but you know, hyper-critical reader, that you would have stigmatized that as "pedantic" at once, and have gone no further. However, let us not quarrel. I merely want to say, before you begin, that if you are in the humour for something orderly, methodical, logical; some article in which the sentences and paragraphs all come in neat, proper, systematic sequence, I merely want to say, do not read this one. This one is rambling and scrambling, has no particular *motif*, does not elucidate some central idea—does nothing whatever of this sort, in fact. Part of it was written in the open air (this same open air blowing my sheets about wildly), part of it in the intervals between trying to quiet a vociferous young son (he is going through that—to others, as well as to himself, painful business—*teething*). There, by this little bit of autobiography I have made the article more heterogeneous than even it was before; I had better put an end to my *post-script* at once.

It is, or used to be in the days when scholars had the hardihood to "take all knowledge to be their province," and had consequently, I suppose, read everything that there was to be read (they had no transliterations of cuneiform inscriptions in those days, and no "Ostiak dialects of Tungusian," much less Rider Haggards or E. P. Roes), it used to be a favourite question amongst scholars as to what lost or meditated but unwritten works each most regretted the lack of. Generally, in the days of "Grecians" and "Latinists," a learned, if not pedantic, discussion followed on some such things as the tragedies of Euripides, or the history of Livy, or the satires of Ennius—things which most ordinary people think we have quite enough of and to spare. With these ordinary people I am quite at one. With the longings of that classical palate for more classics I am not enough of a classic to be able to sympathize—stay; yes, there is one ancient classical writer for whose lost poems I would give a cart-load of tragedies and histories and satires: the poems of that "violet-crowned, pure, sweetly-smiling" Lesbian.* What a great woman and a true poetess said in beautiful poetry of *love* I would give a very great deal to read. Men and women regard this most complicated of emotions so differently. "Men and women do not speak altogether the same language," says Amiel,† and especially is this the case in the matter of love. As Tolstoi says (I presume I am quite in order when quoting Tolstoi now-a-days): "Women are more material than men. We make something immense of love, they are all *terre-à-terre* [of the earth, earthy]."‡

Women are made of coarser fibre than are men, of less finely tempered metal. It is to man's disadvantage, this. The finer the edge, the less useful the instrument, and it is only finely tempered metal that will take on a fine edge. It is the pocket-knife, not the lancet, that is most often called into requisition. To man love is a sacred religion; to woman it is every day morality. The latter truly is the more serviceable as it is the more valuable—nay, it is invaluable.

Next to Sappho's lost poems I should like a contemplated but unwritten book which few, I venture to think, could guess—Thomas Carlyle's "Exodus from Houndsditch." And next to this, for my tastes are catholic, Ruskin's "purposed" but never undertaken chapters "to show what kind of evidence existed respecting the possible influence of country life on men."§ If any one knew how to "look on nature" it was Ruskin. However, it is as useless to cry over unwritten chapters as it is to cry over spilled milk. What I am about to do is something very different; it is to smile over a recent experience of my own respecting the influence of country life, and the companionship of Nature.

I attempted last May, some few readers of THE WEEK may possibly not quite have forgotten, an unpretentious little description of the pleasures experienced during a ten days' communion with Nature. That short flight from busy and careful life was to me so efficacious a physical, intellectual, and moral tonic, that I concluded it would be not waste, but true economy, of time to prescribe for myself another course of the same medicine. So September once more finds me "with Nature," and with the permission of the editor of this paper, I try again to hand on as best I may some of the delights of her friendship.

It is a magical incentive to thought, is seclusion. Was ever anything great, I wonder, done by any man who did not on occasions retire into himself alone, away from the distraction and friction of contact with the busy world and its people. Surely not. Peter, the great preacher of Crusades, is known as "the Hermit;" John, "the Baptist," was a dweller in the wilderness; Mahomet arrived at the then novel and startling conviction that there is no god but God during one of his yearly sojourns in the desert; Horton, Olney, Craigenputtach, Rydal Mount, are names suggestive of the seclusion in which certain immortal books were composed—throughout human history evidences there are in abundance, that before any great work is undertaken or accomplished, there must be spent in one way or another a forty days in the wilderness.

But it seems to be also a truth there such retirement must be only one of forty days, not of a life-time. It is he who knows because he has mixed with men, not the misanthrope, the "clubbable" man, not the "Alastor," who can teach or benefit his fellow-men.

If we grant this theorem (if I may be allowed a very short digression), a curious lemma, so to speak, follows. May we not ascribe the intellectual dearth of the Middle Ages to the commonness of life-long seclusion, to the prevalence of monasticism? And may we not on the other hand ascribe the present wonderful advance in all branches of human thought and activity to the exactly opposite cause, the extraordinary rapidity and facility of intercourse between both individuals and nations so

characteristic of modern Europe? Where do we find the cradle of English advance in science? In the formation of the Royal Society, in systematic intercourse between thinking minds. However, these are subjects more fit for the pen of the philosophical historian.

But, speaking of solitude, how few of us ordinary people, in these days when the word "privacy" seems to have lost all meaning, know anything at all of the charms of periodical retreat. We are "too much in the sun," the sun of the public gaze; and we so accustom ourselves to do everything by its light that we are puzzled, *distract*, when its glare is withdrawn. In solitude we are left to ourselves and our own thoughts, and ourselves not being often agreeable companions, and the majority of us having absolutely and literally no thoughts, we hurry back to our indispensable but still not over-loved sun, the public gaze.

But even if we ordinary people cannot taste, or can only sip, the deep positive pleasures of solitude, we can at all events enjoy the negative ones of getting away for a time from "the daily task, the trivial round." How one relishes the thought that there is no daily newspaper to be read through, no even skimming of the eternal jangle between Gladstonolaters and Gladstonoclasts, of interminable speeches and leading articles on Parnellism or Retaliation. Truly one eats one's breakfast with a keener gusto away from these. Above all, what a blessed feeling of relief creeps over one when it is remembered that there will be no *Saturday Review* to disturb the serenity of the week. That *Saturday Review*, much as I relish its peculiar pungent flavour, I was thankful to be temporarily rid of. It is like a cream ice: very rich—only a little can be taken at a time, very brilliant—but artificial, coloured with the cochineal of affectation and superciliousness, rarely with the natural colouring of superior wisdom, occupying no regular and stated position in the courses of one's newspaper dietary, only indulged in when the hunger for real fact and argument is appeased—coming in as a sort of *entremêt*, very toothsome certainly, but tickling the palate, not nourishing the system. Above all its essence is coldness; heartless and sarcastic cynicism, at times well directed and deserved, but too generally too universally meted out.

But to return. One antidote there is to the disagreeableness of one's own companionship and the lack of thoughts, and this is an observant eye. It is not gained in a day, nor, as I found to my cost, in ten days; still the very practice is enjoyable. This, in September, was especially the case. The splendour, and above all the variety, with which I was surrounded, seemed, and literally was, infinite.

I was present, in May, at the birth of summer; now I witness her death. I have chosen, this time, the shores of a lake instead of the banks of a river as the site of my tent. In a little land-locked bay, on a rocky slope facing the still reed-strewn water it stands, the embodiment of quiet seclusion. How different is the appearance of nature to that it bore in spring! On the virgin bosom of the lake in the month of opening summer lay not a bud; now, too like too many of her human kind, she is adorned with all that all her suitors offer—reeds, grasses, bulrushes, lilies. The foliage too is different. Bashful light greens have given place to bold browns and yellows; and where once were tender, retiring buds, stout branches flaunt their brilliant reds. Summer evidently has passed her time of youth, and is approaching dissolution. And the signs of coming death are beautiful. Like the flush on the pale cheek of the consumptive, they seem to mock at death, seem to bid you not think of death.

In the closing summer one already feels the touch of winter. Autumn is a mixture of summer and winter, and the mixture is very curious and very interesting to notice. The atmosphere puts on that extraordinary clearness prophetic of a colder season. The nights are frosty, the early mornings often filled with a thick and strange-smelling mist. The clouds call to mind Thompson's apt adjective, "dewy-skirted,"* like the graceful "robe-trailing" Grecian women. The whole face of Nature is changing.

Some of the pictures which this combination of summer and winter afforded were wonderful. One five minutes at the close of a rainy day I shall not soon forget. My tent faced the east. The sun, just before it set, came out and lit up that reed-strewn water with that strange soft glowing reddish light peculiar to rainy afternoons. That all, slender plants rising out of the shallow lake caught the rays, the water and the shores beyond caught them, the vermilions and ochres of the foliage caught them and shone out distinctly against the heavy bank of dull grey *nimbus* behind. Above these came glorious *cumuli*, tinged with pink some of them, blue grey others. But the picture is not yet complete, gorgeous though it is. In a great and perfect arch, forming as it were the framework of the scene as I saw it from the shelter of my open-doored tent, came a rainbow, calm above all wind and rain, resting peacefully despite the mixture of lightning and thunder, black rain-cloud, and flashing sun.

Another differently beautiful example of the commingling of a soft with a harsh season there was when once the placid full moon rose in the all but cloudless eastern heavens while a huge and angry storm-cloud swept with growls and fire across the western sky.

These, truly, were sky effects indescribably beautiful, but yet I still hold that for pure majesty of serenity there is nothing to equal the sky at night. To see and to admire the undisturbed sky itself, one must see it night-wrapped, studded with its stars, its myriad stars sweeping grandly from east to west as the hours move slowly on. I can comprehend a little of the thoughts aroused in the mind of that great German philosopher† who found an inexplicable connection and a common source of awe in the stars of heaven and the moral faculty of man. If anything will show man the minute place which he occupies in the great *all* of nature and God, and at the same time open his eyes a little to the duties and responsibilities of that place, it is the contemplation of the midnight sky. There, really

* So Alcaeus called Sappho. The extra-ordinary person will please pardon my notes. † Journal Intime, p. 226. Trans. Mrs. Humphrey Ward. ‡ Anna Karenina. Pt. II. § xxi. Trans. N. H. Dole. § Modern Painters. Vol. v. ch. i. § 7.

* The Seasons—Autumn. † Kant.