SUNDAY READING

NATURE AS A TEACHER.

How it Impresses the Mind of Man With a Belief in God.

Now Nature does everything in her power to make men think. She buries her secrets down deep in her bosom, and only the perpetual hacking of the geologist's hammer can induce her to unburden her treasures at his feet. She flings her sparkling jewels beyond the reach of human touch, and they are brought near to us only by the concentrated thought of weary days and restless nights. Indeed, no deep knowledge of any kind can be gained by the hasty perusal of a penny newspaper. If we would so grasp truth as to make it a power and comfort to our lives we must search for it ourselves, think it out for ourselves, and if we do that, instead of leaving the preacher and essayist to think for us, we shall find that in the familiar objects of the "daily round and common task" there are voices which speak to us, not only of fragrance and beauty, but also of faith, hope and love.

Well, what does nature teach us concerning faith? It teaches us everything. It is not a subject which belongs only to the dusty corner of a dry theology. Take faith from the universe, and you strip it of its loveliness and beauty. The air would cease to reverberate with music, and the earth everywhere would become a wild desolated waste. The principle of faith in man forms the very backbone of society. Those terms which are always upon our lips, and which express the dearest relationships of life—such as husband, wife, home, master, servant—all these are terms which have at their root the idea of faith. "Without faith," says the Book, "it is impossible to please God." And it is equally true that without faith it is impossible for man to please or serve his fellow men. If you have the slightest doubt, for instance, as to a man's integrity or uprightness of character, you erect a barrier by your unbelief, which as effectually alienates you from the society of that man, as would a prison wall or iron gate. Faith enters into the very fibre of our life. We travel by faith, transact business by faith; eat, drink, and sleep by faith. It is faith that sows the seed, plants the vineyard, and sustains the farmer during the barren period of the year, with the hope of a golden harvest. It was faith that discovered the new world, and cut down the jungles of Central Africa, and opened up ways of commerce to the darkest parts of the earth. We shall have but a faint idea of what a world without faith would be, when we think of the rebellions and wars which have arisen from time to time to disturb our social and national life through a lack of it. And yet there are those who, fearing not God, profess to have no faith in man. No faith in man! It would mean the death-blow to all peace and harmony. Nature itself teaches us.

But if nature teaches us to exercise faith in man, it also teaches us to have faith in God. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork. Day unto day utteretb speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge." When the great astronomer Galileo was questioned by his accusers as to his belief in God, he is said to have answered them by pointing to a straw which lay upon his prison floor, and saying that in the structure of that single straw they had sufficient evidence to prove the existence of an intelligent Creator. And in doing that, Galileo was simply following the method of Jesus before him, "Consider the lilies how they grow," said the Master. "Take the microscope if you will. Watch the development of cell after cell; analyse, if you can, its shades of colour. Call yourself a botanist, and explain to us the processes of nutrition and growth." Consider the lilies of the field, and see in the grace, beauty, and fragrance of their apparel a grandeur far outvying the pomp and majesty of kings. Consider the lilies how they grow. No gloomy scepticism casts a shadow upon their loveliness. "They toil not, neither do they spin," and yet your heavenly Father cares for them. Go, then, and learn from them a lesson of faith in Him whose finger fashioned them—and whose pencil gave them tint. Thus would Christ lead us up the "slope of Nature's great altar steps" into the presence of Nature's God and King.

There is something about Nature which almost forces upon us a belief in God—just as there is on the other hand—in town life a something which fosters the spirit of unbelief and indifference. In the noisy bustling town the sooty marks of man's fingers are on everything we see—the sky of blue is almost hidden behind the ever-ascending clouds of smoke—if there is any music it cannot be heard for the whirl and din of business wheels. The only way it is possible to hold communication with God at all is by erecting an altar upon some consecrated spot, and shutting it off from the outside world by the four walls of a building which we call a church, or place of worship. But how different is the calm influence of nature! We have but to walk through her shady avenues and we see the handwriting of God written upon every flower which nestles at our feet. We hear His voice in the waves that murmur upon the beach, and catch the rumble of His chariot wheels in the rolling thunder. When we look upon the fields of ripe waving corn, we almost feel as if we could touch the golden hem of His garment. Even the French sceptic is compelled to acknowledge that the "Fatherly smile which every now and then gleams through Nature bears witness to the truth that an Eye looks down upon us and a Divine Heart follows us." Yes, and thank God, we are able even to go beyond that; for as we stand in Nature and gaze with dread into those mysterious Eyes that watch us, and feel the pulsations of that Great Heart that follows us, Christ comes to our side, and drawing aside the veil that "half reveals and half conceals the face behind it," whispers "When ye pray say, 'Our Father which art in Heaven.'"

Thus are we brought from the simple belief in God to a belief in the Divine Fatherhood. "The world is not the work of some giant who in a moment of spasmodic strength threw off the miracle of creation." It is the homestead of an all-loving Father, who presides over every department of its life, and sustains all things by His ever-abiding providential strength.—Rev. A. E. Butler.

BROTHERS OF MERCY.

A Noble Organization Which Was Founded by a Humble Porter.

Among the many curious mediæval objects and customs which strike the foreign resident in Florence one of the most imposing is a Florentine funeral, writes Eliza A. Boucher, in the N. Y. Voice. These always take place at night, and the sight is a wierd and imposing one.

On Christmas Eve last I met two of these mournful processions passing down the crowded Via Cavour, one of the few broad streets of Florence. In front was borne aloft a sacred banner surmounted with the crucifix, then comes a crowd of white-robed priests and acolytes, intoning the solemn funeral service, numbers of large flaming flambeaux being carried by the attendants. Then followed the open bier with the coffin covered by a gorgeous pall embroidered in gold, and beside it, taper in hand, walked the nuns in their picturesque dress, or women with black lace veils thrown over their heads. But the most striking feature of the cortege were the lay Brothers of the Misericordia in their long black robes and masks, the whole dress forming one piece with holes cut for the eyes. Anything more truly weird and strange to unaccustomed eyes than their sombre forms seen by the lurid light of their flambeaux can hardly be imagined. Sometimes instead of these last, the Brothers of the Sacrament perform the last rites and carry the coffin on a handbier; these are arrayed precisely like the above, only their robes and masks are white, and has, if possible, a still more gruesome effect at night. The coffin is then borne by the Brothers into the church and after the service, is taken by them to the mortuary, where the lid is removed for a short time that the relatives and friends may take their last look; and this is the most painful part of the ceremony, as at the poorer mortuaries a regular mob of the lower classes crowd round the gate and endeavor to gratify their morbid curiosity by obtaining a sight of the dead.

It is impossible to over estimate the merciful and beneficent work of the Misericordia, whose ranks are filled by men drawn from all classes of society, from the prince downward. They are liable to be summoned to their noble work by the sound of a bell at any hour of the night and day, and in case of an accident you encounter their sombre figures carrying the black covered ambulance litter, and hastening with ever willing feet to the rescue. And when the sick of either sex, even in private houses, have to be carried from one room to another or have other offices to perform requiring strength and nursing skill, the first care of the relatives of the sick person is to send for the Misericordia, who perform their work in the most delicate and tender manner conceivable.

The origin of the order dates back to the 13th century, and was "originated by a pious porter who, horrified by the oaths and vices of his companions, proposed that any one of them blaspheming the names of Christ or Virgin should pay a fine into a box suspended against the walls of the cellar in which they were wont to assemble. A considerable sum was thus raised, and six litters were purchased for conveying the sick and wounded to the hospitals or their homes, and for carrying the dead to burial, Florence being at that time distracted by war and pestilences, while they were also enabled to purchase the rooms above their cellar, which they converted into a chapel or refectory."

It was from this small beginning that the Brotherhood of the Misericordia had its origin, and to this humble porter the "City of Flowers" owes one of the noblest and most remarkable institutions which, having survived the ravages of time and change, still stands as a lasting memorial of the Samaritan-like charity and christian benevolence of her ancient sons in those far off mediæval ages whose grandeur her noble old palaces and venerable churches so mutely yet eloquently proclaim.

Messages of Help For the Week.

Sunday.—Psalm 65, 4: "Blessed is the man whom thou causest to approach unto thee, that he may dwell in thy courts: we shall be satisfied with the goodness of thy house, even of thy holy temple."

Monday.—Prov. 27, 25: "The tender grass sheweth itself."

Tuesday.—Psalm 65, 9: "Thou visitest the earth and waterest it: thou greatly enrichest it with the river of God, which is full of water: thou preparest them corn, when thou hast so provided for it."

Wednesday.—10 v: "Thou waterest the ridges thereof abundantly: thou settlest the furrows thereof: thou makest it soft with showers: thou blessest the springing thereof."

Thursday.—Psalm 67, 4: "O let the nations be glad and sing for joy: for thou shalt judge the people righteously, and govern the nations upon the earth."

Friday.—5 v: "Let all the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee."

Saturday.—6 v: "Then shall the earth yield her increase; and God, even our God, shall bless us."

NEWS AND NOTABILIA.

The only prayers that God will answer are those that we cannot.

There are now ninety-two Christian churches in the city of Tokio.

Rev. F. E. Clark, the originator and president of the Christian Endeaverer movement, is a Canadian by birth.

It may be news to most people, but Mr. Gladstone personally is much opposed to Saturday sittings of the House of Commons and only tolerates them on the ground of their necessity.

The winds make the waves. Christ rebuked the wind and stilled the waves. The true peace comes when He rebukes the evil which disturbs the conscience, and gives us rest in pardoning love.

The Bishop of Pretoria, the Bishop of Cairo, Ill., U. S. A., the Dean of Bloemfontein, and Archdeacon Bedford-Jones, Kingston, Ontario, have consented to become vice-presidents of the society of St. Osmund.

The Bishop of Manchester attended service on Sunday, April 9, (the Greek Easter day), at the Greek church at Manchester. The Archimandrite, alluding to his lordship's presence, expressed his warm desire for the reunion of Christendom.

Rev. Dr. McCosh, ex-president of Princeton University, attributes much of his hearty old age to his fondness for outdoor exercise. The venerable instructor is specially a lover of flowers, and he watches over those in his garden as a mother does over her children.

The Rev. Dr. Swaby, who has been appointed Bishop of British Guinea, is the only instance of one who was once a Nonconformist minister obtaining a bishopric. Starting in life as a reporter on a North country paper, he was for some years a Wesleyan minister.

Singing birds are the great pets of the Pope. In the library at the Vatican a number of songsters are kept in cages. Their twittering never seems to disturb Leo XIII., although it is in this apartment that many of his receptions take place and some of his discourses are given.

The foundation-stone of the new church for the Society of St. John the Evangelist at Cowley St. John, Oxford, Eng., will not be laid until at least half of the whole amount required has been raised. At present £2,646 15s. 11d. has been received. The estimated cost is £12,000, without furniture.

Mdme. Tel Sono, the Japanese reformer, who is now lecturing in England to raise funds to establish in Tokio a non-sectarian training-school for women and girls, had the honor of being the first woman lawyer in Japan. She has been a christian for five years, and is deeply interested in work among the "high class" in her country.

When a man comes to Christ because Christ enters into him, he enters into rest. There follow the calming of the conscience and reconciliation with God, there is the beginning of the harmonising of the whole nature in one supreme and satisfying love and devotion. These things still the storm and make the incipient christian life in a true fashion, though in a small measure, participant of the rest of God.—Dr. Maclaren.

Mr. W. B. Richmond's design for the central compartment of the curved ceiling of the apse to the choir of St. Paul's Cathedral is virtually completed, the cartoon represents Christ seated in glory, a particular feature of which is the crown which resembles somewhat in shape the imperial crown of Germany. It is estimated that it will take fifteen years to carry out the whole scheme of decoration, even though the designs for the many parts to be treated are well forward.

At the monthly general meeting of the S. P. C. K., held in London, on the 11th inst., money grants from the general fund, to the value of six hundred and fifteen pounds, were voted to fourteen dioceses at home and in the colonies, mainly in aid of church and school buildings, and book grants amounting to £846 7s 4d. were also made. An additional grant of £1,000 was made to the Foreign Translation Committee, besides other sums in aid of passages, etc., and including £270 for three theological studentships of £30 per annum for three years voted to the diocese of Montreal.

The American church is mourning the loss of a venerable prelate, the Right Rev. W. Ingraham Kip, Bishop of California, whose episcopate extended over forty years. Formerly assistant rector of Grace church, New York city, and subsequently rector of St. Paul's, Albany, he was sent as missionary bishop to California in the year 1853, when a vast population had sprung up in the goldfields. Four years afterwards he was appointed to the see of California, and has labored in that state ever since. His lordship's work among the diggers was invaluable, and served more than anything to establish something like order and decency among a community to which law was unknown.

The age of the youngest English organist ever appointed was eight years, that being the age of J. T. Freye, when he was in 1820 appointed organist of Saffron Walden Church, which position he held for sixty-four years. Albert Sherry, when between ten and eleven years of age, was appointed organist of St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, Goulden street, Manchester. The United Presbyterian congregation at Melrose appointed Nichol Afflleck, thirteen years of age, organist of their church, he having been selected out of a number of candidates. Master T. Sharples, of Worsley, thirteen years of age, was appointed organist of Christ's Church, Patricroft, after competition.

There are still two European churches in which the practice of dancing has survived—those of Seville, and Echternach in Luxembourg. At Seville it is customary on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, and of Corpus Christi, for the choir boys in the cathedral to dance during the elevation of the Host. A ballet is danced every evening during the octave of the feast before the high altar, by boys from twelve to seventeen years of age, in plumed hats and the dress of pages of the time of Phillip III. At Echternach Abbey church the dance is held on the feast of St. Willibrod. It consists of a dancing procession round the town to the abbey and into the church, where dancing takes place, and is witnessed by many thousands of people.

TRANSFIGURED LIVES.

How Our Highest Ideal Should be Sacredly Cherished and Guarded.

There is a pathetic story of a French sculptor which illustrates the sacredness with which life's ideal should be cherished and guarded. He was a genius and was at work on his masterpiece. But he was a poor man, and lived in a small garret, which was studio, workshop, and bedroom to him. He had his statue almost finished, in clay, when one night there came suddenly a great frost over the city. The sculptor lay in his bed with his statue before him in the centre of the fireless room. As the chill air came down upon him he knew that in the intense cold there was danger that the water in the interstices of the clay would freeze, and destroy his precious work. So the old man arose from his bed and took the clothes that had covered him in his sleep, and reverently wrapped them about his statue to save it, then lay down himself in the cold, uncovered. In the morning, when his friends came in they found the old sculptor dead; but the image was preserved unharmed.

We have each in our soul, if we are true believers in Christ, a vision of spiritual loveliness into which we are striving to fashion ourselves. This vision is our conception of the character of Christ. "That is what I am going to be some day," we say. Far away beyond our present attainment as this vision may shine, yet we are ever striving to reach it. This is the ideal which we carry in our hearts amid all our toiling and struggling. This ideal we must keep free from all marring or stain. We must save it, though, like the old sculptor, we lose our very life in guarding it. We should be willing to die rather than give it up to be destroyed. We should preserve the image of Christ, bright, radiant, unsoiled in our soul, until it transforms our dull, sinful, earthly life into its own transfigured beauty. Rev. J. R. Miller, D. D.

Freemasonry and Religion.

The London Church Times has this to say in answer to a query by a correspondent:—Freemasonry does not pretend to be a religion any more than do benefit or temperance societies. Some foolish masons pretend to make it a religion, just as some teetotallers have no other religion, than their so-called "temperance" or "total abstinence." All such societies profess to be hand-maids to religion, and nothing more. Freemasonry, in its present form, was invented by Dr. Desaguliers, George Payne the antiquary, and Dr. Anderson, in 1717. It took four years to elaborate the system of ethics and symbols, and it was then established under royal favour. The first two degrees remain almost in their original form of an ancient Catholic guild, and, though the degrees and ceremonies have been more and more beautifully developed, in process of time, all the symbols and ritual used are strictly Catholic. "Brotherly love," founded on the one simple principle of love of the Divine Father, is the aim and end of the society, from which politics and religious controversy are altogether excluded.

Fragments of Thought.

Whoever loves in us our beauty of soul loves us truly.—St. Ambrose.

The tenderest words are in keeping only with the tenderest moments.

A man trusting in his own righteousness is like seeking shelter under one's shadow. The lower we bend we still find our shadow beneath us.

None ever truly and ingenuously sought the truth but they found it. A spirit of earnest inquiry is the gift of God, who never says to any: "See ye My face in vain."—William Cowper.

If I die, the world shall miss me but a little; I shall miss it less. Not it me, because it hath much store of better men; not I it, because it hath so much ill, and I shall have so much happiness.

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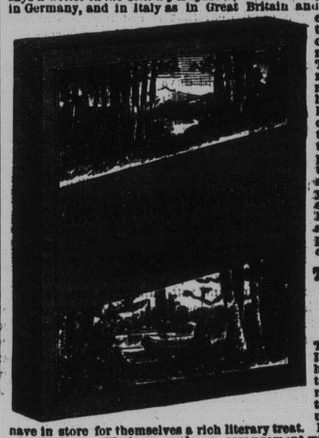

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