

RANDOM SKETCHES.

BY REV. ARTHUR MURSELL.

"TONGUES in the trees," says Shakespeare; and, verily, there is no tree without its tongue; without its special message and memory to special ears, as well as its general homily to the world at large. Some of us whose boyhood's days seem sliding further and further back, could bring the waning picture on the canvas in all its vividness out of the mist of gathering years, if only we could stroll past some broad elm, or beech, or oak, whose boughs are eloquent with the lore of old. There stands the tree whose topmost branch it was my boyish pride to climb; he doesn't look nearly so much older as I do, with his greenery of May round his brow. Those higher forks, where I would rest and laugh at my companions down below, they could not bear my weight to-day! There are many voices in that tree; voices of young playmates now grown old; voices of warm red lips now sealed and silent.

"In the days of old, when the spring with gold
Was lighting his branches grey,
Through the grass at his feet crept maidens sweet,
To gather the dew of May.
And all that day, to the rebeck gay
We frolicked with lovesome swains;
They are gone, they are dead, in the churchyard laid,
But the tree, he still remains."

Walking out with a friend one day, he beckoned me suddenly aside from the beaten path, and said, "Just come and let us sit down a minute under this tree." And we sat down under a broad branching plane tree. My companion was silent for a few moments, and seeing he was moved at something, I did not disturb him. At length he said, "My first act as a child of God was to climb up into this tree to fetch down my cup. I had been hearing an address which very much affected me, and sat down here to think about it; meditation soon deepened into prayer; and prayer was quickly answered by a sudden peace. With the fulness of assurance came a wild ecstacy; and flinging up my cap in the energy of my joy, it lodged in the branches, and my first act as a Christian was to climb up and fetch it down." From this it will be seen that my companion was what ordinary folk would call "peculiar"; but he was wonderfully in earnest, and there could be no mistaking the realness of the memories which that tree called into his mind. Would that we all had a tree which whispered such experience to us! What a tongue is that which murmurs softly into some distraught ear, which has, like the pilgrim, been pestered for years by the "satyrs, and goblins, and dragons of the pit," "Thy sins are forgiven thee!" And how sweet are the May leaves which are redolent with the peace of God which passeth all understanding! One would think that little Zachæus would often look reverently at the sycamore which he climbed as a vantage spot from which to glimpse the passing Christ, and fancy that its leaves and branches were still vocal with the call, "Make haste, come down, for to-day I must abide in thy house."

And in May the trees seem specially communicative. They seem inclined to break to us some of the sacred confidences they have heard. In one of the least romantic spots of unromantic Lancashire, there is a blackened elm tree, on whose bark the smoke of a hundred grimy factories clings thick, but which furls out its flag of green, its banner of buds, under the May sky as cheerily as if it grew in the wildest and remotest valley of the country. Whenever I pass by that tree in May, and hear the breeze sighing through its trembling fronds, I feel inclined to answer back, and, with my finger on my lip, to say, "Hush!" I feel afraid it is telling to all passers-by my secret. But the ivy clasps about its smoky stem, and my memory clings with the fibres that embrace it, and makes it sacred to the past, and living in the heart beats of a boyish love.

In Holwood Park, near Beckenham, there is a gnarled root straggling its holes over the ground; burrowed by rabbits, it stands out like a sinuous snake above the earth; twining in spring amongst anemones and primrose eyes, and almost kissed by the rich leaves upon the bending boughs to which it gives their life, marking the site of a tree whose tongue rang out a shout across the broad Atlantic, and made a million hearts leap with a new hope, and a million eyes sparkle with a new joy. It rung a knell over a hoary tyranny, and spoke

the birth-cry of the slave's regeneration. For the straggler past this monarch of the wood will find an old chair, into whose back is sunk a metal plate with an inscription. And it tells him, that while musing on the twisted roots of that old tree, the resolve was born within the large and tender mind of Wilberforce that he would move the British Parliament to decree the freedom of the slaves in British colonies. And to the mind of the philanthropist, that tree is full of the echoes of falling chains; and its tongue speaks of an act among the most magnanimous and sublime in the annals of the world, an act which transpired at the most auspicious period of the world's history; at a time of the most profound and general peace ever enjoyed since Augustus Cæsar shut the gates of Janus; when the crown of the fairest empero of the earth had just been placed on the youthful brow of Victoria, the beloved mistress of a free people. When a century shall have passed away, when statesmen are forgotten, when all our proudest naval and military achievements shall have faded from the recollection of mankind, when the blatant and ephemeral echoes of "the Reformer's Tree" shall have passed upon the breeze, one voice shall leave its testimony—the voice of that tree whose Wilberforce dreamed the dream of freedom; and it shall be recorded on the scroll of the eternities that the greatest glory England ever won was when she, with her girl-queen at her head, proclaimed the slave is free, and established in practice the principle enscrolled upon the American Constitution, which was so tardy to enforce it—that "all men are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Another tree! I saw it once in winter time, with all its twigs and branches bare, and a cold north wind sighed through its thin anatomy; and a sigh was at my heart as bleak and as desponding as the moan it made. For its boughs were dipping over a slab of marble, upon which I had carved the words "He gave thee, He took thee, and He will restore thee." But this tree was hiding more than half the sentence, and all that I could read as I walked by was, "He took thee." Yes, took thee, and left me. Left me, oh, how lonely! As I moved a little further on, I could read the first sentence of the line, "He gave thee." Well, if He gave thee, surely He has a right to take thee. Why should I murmur? And yet I *did* murmur, and I walked away in heaviness. But I went past the same spot last Easter-tide, the time of resurrection; and the early green was on the boughs. A west wind blow gently this time, and it so tossed the branches that they covered up "He took thee," but left bare and legible "He shall restore thee." The spring buds spoke of resurrection, and a happy bird perched on the stone at the moment; and as it sang it seemed to say, "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

Yes, the bard was right. Trees have tongues, and they talk to us with varied messages. On *Ellen's Isle*, whose fescus are wet with the kisses of Loch Katrine, groups of graceful birch-trees look through their tresses in the mirror down below, and their white stems are reflected like silver wands dipped into the limpid stream. Two tourists, punting round the Trossachs Bay, were musing at the beauty of the scene. One talked of love-making and romance, and said the picture took him back to a few years ago, when he wooed the maiden, now a matron, and declared the tender passion which had now girdled his table with hungry mouths, and filled his nursery with many voices. "Oh," said the other, "it carries me much farther back than that; in fact, it makes me sore, not at my heart, but in my back. As I looked up at those birch trees I fancied myself across the knees of a stern schoolmaster, who always disregarded the injunction "This side up," and by whom I was constantly inverted, and the stripe of the old rod seemed to swish once more behind me. He used to say, it hurt him more to *larrup* me than it hurt me to be larrupped. But I only wish he had allowed our positions to be reversed, and I had been the flogger and he the floggee. I know it would not have hurt me so much as I would have taken care it should have hurt him!"

Dear reader! Look up not only with your eyes, but with your ears, at the trees this blythe May-time, and they will speak to you. They will take you back into the long ago, and Nature, with her many voices, shall teach you that there are—

Tongues in the trees; books in the running brooks;
Sermons in stones; and good in everything.