



The Shadow on the Dial

By Marjorie L. C. Pichthall

I READ somewhere that a new era of romance is dawning upon the world. I think it was Mr. Richard Le Gallienne, to whom we owe this news, together with many other things equally charming and ineffectual. Kipling would have us believe that romance is always present in the outward and physical conditions of human life. But is it not rather true to say that at certain times within its history the human mind, touched inexplicably to some great issue, lightened with some sudden glory, does so shine upon its prison house of circumstance that it beautifies its bars, and the thoughts of the living dust becomes as a ladder upon which ascend and descend the angels of the thoughts of God? This is only saying at length that romance is a thing of the soul rather than of the world, the flesh, and the devil, with which alone we are apt to identify it. And that the sordid, stupefied slave, crouching in some cellar of old Rome to hear the half-understood words of some dreamer who had chanced to speak with Paul, a man of Tarsus, was of an age supremely greater in romance than the age of powder and satin and spiritual stagnation, about which Thackeray has woven for us so heavenly a delusion. And so perhaps Kipling and I are thinking upon converging lines, which must be very comforting for Kipling. Anyhow, Mr. Le Gallienne insists upon the romance of the telephone, the phonograph, and even, maybe, of the gasoline-launch and the fireless cooker.

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THERE are few things more beautiful, and none more terribly instructive, than the dried riverbeds of Ontario. They are almost as frequent as concession roads and infinitely more picturesque. Most of them are mere green valleys, with a line of rich water-loving trees along the shelving banks, which are terraced with old grass-grown beaches and forgotten tides. Almost within the memory of man they must have been respectable streams. And now in midsummer the thirsty cattle can scarcely find a pool in which to roll. When I went for my holidays the drought had lasted for more than a month, and the land was parched and withered, and the crops ripening half-grown. No country like Ontario should be dependent upon rainfall; it should be well watered, and to be well watered there must be trees to conserve the rainfall. We are a slovenly and wasteful folk. The cracking fields, the bare, bleached uplands, the cattle crowding into the shadow of one lone elm, the blackened muddle of the clearings, all seem to cry out again for trees. In another generation the country people will be coming to the cities to have a look at the shade trees as well as the fireworks at the Exhibition.

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THE wise people say that trees never were worshipped in themselves, only held in reverence through association with some greater or lesser deity. I am inclined to think, though, that behind the unknown ancient faiths of the Kelts lay a genuine tree-worship, or at least a worship in which trees held a very sacred place. In that wonderful Armoric legend of the whelmed city of Ys, of the fair witch Ahes, and of Gradlon the king, there is a curious little mythus embodied. You must know that when Ahes by her enchantments had let in upon Ys the unpitying seas, and her father, Gradlon, had tried in vain to bear her away with him on the croup of his great war-horse, he fled ever inland with the surges thundering at his horse's heels and the singing of Ahes the sorceress in the salt winds that whipped about his ears, and despair in his heart. He fled for weeks and months from that singing voice of the seas, ever drawn back to the long beaches and the gray tideways where Ahes took her due of the lives of men, and ever fighting against the call; a man without a home, a king without a country. At last he grew very old and thin and grey, like a wisp of dried weed, and he was a beggar at the doors of the monasteries, a wanderer by all the waysides of the world. The

poor knew him as the poorest among them, and the rich forgot that he had been a king. And so at last he roamed into the great forests, and there he found the oldest and the last of all the great Druids, who was so old that his feet had grown into the soil as they had been the roots of a tree, and his arms were forever outspread, stiffened and brown and twisted like the branches of an old oak, and his fingers were like twigs.

The Norse, too, had the great World-Ash, Ygdrasil, which binds together earth and heaven and hell, whose boughs drip honey, and at whose roots the serpent Nithoggr gnaws forever. The Greeks had their fair tree-spirits; and these disrespectful old races mentioned in the Bible had their sacred groves, the destruction of which was equivalent to the destruction of the worship of the god they enshrined. Personally, I don't wonder they prayed to trees. Trees know so very much, especially at night, when they clothe themselves in personality as in a garment, and are very still, very watchful, very much aware. Time and time again I know I have almost caught a dryad, one of those quick birch dryads with the silvery fair hair, or a brown maple dryad in moccasins; but I was just a wee bit too slow or something. The hemlock and cedar dryads one could never catch, nor could one imagine the shapes thereof.

Poets have always loved trees. And it should be rather interesting to compile a sort of tree-anthology. I would begin with Lanier's "Ballad of Trees and the Master"; and then I think I would take that very lovely and little-quoted one of our own Isabella Valancy Crawford—"The City Tree."

" When to and fro my branches wave and sway,

Answering the feeble winds that faintly calls,
They kiss no kindred boughs, but touch alway
The stones of climbing walls.

"Not mine to watch across the free, broad plains,
The whirl of stormy cohorts sweeping fast,
The level silver lances of great rains
Blown onward by the blast.

"Not mine to watch the wild swan drift above,
Balanced on wings that could not choose between
The wooing sky, blue as the eye of love,
And my own tender green. . . ."

And there I would have W. W. Campbell's "Dryad," whose—

" Soul was sown with the seed of the tree
Of old when the world was young. . . ."

And many and many a picture from Lampman—

"Not far to fieldward in the central heat,
Shadowing the clover, a pale poplar stands,
With glimmering leaves, when the wind comes, beat
Together like innumerable small hands,
And with the calm, as in vague dreams astray,
Hang wan and silver-grey. . . ."

Those maples of his, too, who

" Gathered down the sun's last smiles a cold
Deep, deep into their luminous hearts of gold. . . ."

And Miss Wetherald's

"Green apple branches full of green apples."

And not least, Roberts' splendid "Fir Woods,"

"The wash of endless waves is in their tops,
Endlessly swaying, and the long winds stream
Athwart them from the far-off shores of dream.
Through the stirred branches filtering, faintly drops
Mystic dream-dust of isle and palm and cave,
Coral and sapphire, realms of rose, that seem
More radiant than ever earthly gleam
Revealed of fairy mead or haunted wave.

"A cloud of gold, a cleft of blue profound,
These are my gates of wonder, surged about
By tumult of tossed bough and rocking crest.
The vision lures. The spirit spurns her bound,
Spreads her unprisoned wing, and drifts from out
This green and humming gloom that wraps my
rest. . . ."

The trouble would be to choose among so many. But will not someone please undertake the task?

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THERE is a strange story in song, one of those old wandering Persian songs, without beginning or end, that deals with an acacia tree and the girl Gouhera, who was so beautiful that she won the heart of a Khan.

The Khan was out hunting, in the dim desert, with his greyhounds and his hawks. In the proper manner of stories, he became separated from his men and sought shelter in the black tents of the desert dwellers. In one of these tents he saw the beauty of Gouhera, glowing like a star in still water, like an image of pearl under a roof of gold, like the white rose that opens in the night and dies for the dawn. And the prince took the jewels of his turban and the diamond from the hilt of his sword and his finest gerfalcon, and showed them to the father of Gouhera.

The old man looked at them as they glistened in the firelight, and made it known that they were not enough. Gouhera sat silent and still in the shadows and smiled slowly at the prince, and it was to him as if the petals of golden roses fell upon his heart.

So he offered his royal greyhounds of Mazanderan, and an ass-load of gold, and a league or more of rich herd-land that lay along the desert like a green ribbon, and the choice of the peach-orchards that are by Ferumad. "But the old chief said, 'What are these things to the children of the sands and the winds? Will the wild ass bow his neck to the shaking of a bridle, even though the bells thereof be of silver?'"

Then the prince took his sword, and with it he wounded his arm so that the sand under the fold-skirts of the tent was reddened with his blood and a slow fire came in the still eyes of Gouhera. "Behold," he said, "I give all that I can, for I give Life." And the old man bowed his head, and Gouhera the desert girl arose and touched the feet of the prince. Then he took her upon his horse and made to ride away with her. Only the woman who of old had been her nurse came and clung around the hooves of the horse, and the beast was of royal breed and would not move to harm her.

Then Gouhera bent from the saddle and laid her lips, which were like scarlet silk from the bazaars, upon the leaves of a young acacia tree. "See," she said, "I have laid this dream upon the tree, that it lives my life and dies my death, and so you shall know, O heart of faith, how it is with me. Only," she said, "do not let the winds of the desert break the branches, or it is my heart that will break; and do not let it wither in the droughts, or it is my hopes that will wither; and do not let the floods sweep it away, or it is I that shall drown in tears." Then she rode away to the prince's city and her folk saw her no more.

In the unaccountable way of such folk-tales, the song really ends here. There is no more than a strange refrain of question and answer in a very minor key—

"I went through the desert and behold there was no green thing. I sought for the sweet springs and they were dried up. O Zahrutra, where are they that held me in remembrance?"

"There is none to hold thee in remembrance, O Gouhera, save the grey sands of the desert and the fickle wind. As the wind blots out the track of the caravan in the sand, so time blots out that which is no more."

"I had a little sister, and her hair was all of gold flowers. Her hands were of green leaves, she sat upon the sands and moved not. O Zahrutra, I have sought her and she is not found."

"Behold, the little sisters of the sands are many. Call them and they will answer."

"O Zahrutra, I have called, but my little green sister does not hear, she is deaf. My life was rooted with her life, with my lips I laid life upon her like a dream, and out of remembrance comes life, but death comes from forgetfulness. O Zahrutra, I am weary. In the king's palace I am tired. I will lie down and dream of my little sister whose green heart is one with mine."

"Hush, O daughters of laughter, for Gouhera sleeps. She dreams of her little sister who was before the tent of her father. Gouhera sleeps very soundly. Even at the coming of the prince she is still. O Gouhera, O Gouhera."

On this broken note it ends; much of it is lost, more is mistranslated. But I think it must mean that the desert folk forgot Gouhera, and when her old nurse died they let the little acacia tree wither in the drought and break in the wind-storms, until at last it died. And in the palace of the great Kahn Gouhera died also.