

THE FORESTER.

Then bless thy secret growth, nor catch
 At noise, but thrive unseen and dumb,
 Keep clean, bear fruit, earn life, and watch
 Till the white-winged reapers come. — HENRY VAUGHAN.

I HAD never thought of knowing a man so thoroughly of the country as this friend of mine, and so purely a son of Nature. Perhaps he has the profoundest passion for it of any one living; and had the human sentiment been as tender from the first, and as pervading, we might have had pastorals of which Virgil and Theocritus would have envied him the authorship, had they chanced to be his contemporaries. As it is, he has come nearer the antique spirit than any of our native poets, and touched the fields and groves and streams of his native town with a classic interest that shall not fade. Some of his verses are suffused with an elegiac tenderness, as if the woods and fields bewailed the absence of their forester, and murmured their griefs meanwhile to one another, — responsive like idyls. Living in close companionship with Nature, his Muse breathes the spirit and voice of poetry; his excellence lying herein: for when the heart is once divorced from the senses and all sympathy with common things, then poetry has fled, and the love that sings.

The most welcome of companions, this plain countryman. One shall not meet with thoughts invigorating like his often: coming so scented of mountain and field breezes and rippling springs, so like a luxuriant clod from under forest-leaves, moist and mossy with earth-spirits. His presence is tonic, like ice-water in dog-days to the parched citizen pent in chambers and under brazen ceilings. Welcome as the gurgle of brooks, the dripping of pitchers, — then drink and be cool! He seems one with things, of Nature's essence and core, knit of strong timbers, most like a wood and its inhabitants. There are in him sod and shade, woods and waters manifold,

the mould and mist of earth and sky. Self-poised and sagacious as any denizen of the elements, he has the key to every animal's brain, every plant, every shrub; and were an Indian to flower forth, and reveal the secrets hidden in his cranium, it would not be more surprising than the speech of our Sylvanus. He must belong to the Homeric age, — is older than pastures and gardens, as if he were of the race of heroes, and one with the elements. He, of all men, seems to be the native New-Englander, as much so as the oak, the granite ledge, our best sample of an indigenous American, untouched by the Old Country, unless he came down from Thor, the Northman; as yet unfathered by any, and a non-descript in the books of natural history.

A peripatetic philosopher, and out of doors for the best parts of his days and nights, he has manifold weather and seasons in him, and the manners of an animal of probity and virtues unstained. Of our moralists he seems the wholesomest; and the best republican citizen in the world, — always at home, and minding his own affairs. Perhaps a little over-confident sometimes, and stiffly individual, dropping society clean out of his theories, while standing friendly in his strict sense of friendship, there is in him an integrity and sense of justice that make possible and actual the virtues of Sparta and the Stoics, and all the more welcome to us in these times of shuffling and of pusillanimity. Plutarch would have made him immortal in his pages, had he lived before his day. Nor have we any so modern as he, — his own and ours; too purely so to be appreciated at once. A scholar by birth-right, and an author, his fame has not yet travelled far from the banks of the rivers he has described in his books; but I haz-

ard only the truth in affirming of his prose, that in substance and sense it surpasses that of any naturalist of his time, and that he is sure of a reading in the future. There are fairer fishes in his pages than any now swimming in our streams, and some sleep of his on the banks of the Merrimack by moonlight that Egypt never rivalled; a morning of which Memnon might have envied the music, and a greyhound that was meant for Adonis; some frogs, too, better than any of Aristophanes. Perhaps we have had no eyes like his since Pliny's time. His senses seem double, giving him access to secrets not easily read by other men: his sagacity resembling that of the beaver and the bee, the dog and the deer; an instinct for seeing and judging, as by some other or seventh sense, dealing with objects as if they were shooting forth from his own mind mythologically, thus completing Nature all round to his senses, and a creation of his at the moment. I am sure he knows the animals, one by one, and everything else knowable in our town, and has named them rightly as Adam did in Paradise, if he be not that ancestor himself. His works are pieces of exquisite sense, celebrations of Nature's virginity, exemplified by rare learning and original observations. Persistently independent and manly, he criticizes men and times largely, urging and defending his opinions with the spirit and pertinacity befitting a descendant of him of the Hammer. A head of mixed genealogy like his, Franco-Norman crossed by Scottish and New-England descent, may be forgiven a few characteristic peculiarities and trechant traits of thinking, amidst his great common sense and fidelity to the core of natural things. Seldom has a head circumscribed so much of the sense of Cosmos as this footed intelligence, — nothing less than all out-of-doors sufficing his genius and scopes, and, day by day, through all weeks and seasons, the year round.

If one would find the wealth of wit there is in this plain man, the information, the sagacity, the poetry, the piety,

let him take a walk with him, say of a winter's afternoon, to the Blue Water, or anywhere about the outskirts of his village-residence. Pagan as he shall outwardly appear, yet he soon shall be seen to be the hearty worshipper of whatsoever is sound and wholesome in Nature, — a piece of russet probity and sound sense that she delights to own and honor. His talk shall be suggestive, subtle, and sincere, under as many masks and mimicries as the shows he passes, and as significant, — Nature choosing to speak through her chosen mouth-piece, — cynically, perhaps, sometimes, and searching into the marrows of men and times he chances to speak of, to his discomfort mostly, and avoidance. Nature, poetry, life, — not politics, not strict science, not society as it is, — are his preferred themes: the new Pantheon, probably, before he gets far, to the naming of the gods some coming Angelo, some Pliny, is to paint and describe. The world is holy, the things seen symbolizing the Unseen, and worthy of worship so, the Zoroastrian rites most becoming a nature so fine as ours in this thin newness, this worship being so sensible, so promotive of possible pieties, — calling us out of doors and under the firmament, where health and wholesomeness are finely insinuated into our souls, — not as idolaters, but as idealists, the seekers of the Unseen through images of the Invisible.

I think his religion of the most primitive type, and inclusive of all natural creatures and things, even to "the sparrow that falls to the ground," — though never by shot of his, — and, for whatsoever is manly in man, his worship may compare with that of the priests and heroes of pagan times. Nor is he false to these traits under any guise, — worshipping at unbloody altars, a favorite of the Unseen, Wisest, and Best. Certainly he is better poised and more nearly self-reliant than other men.

Perhaps he deals best with matter, properly, though very adroitly with mind, with persons, as he knows them best, and sees them from Nature's circle, wherein he dwells habitually. I should say he

inspired the sentiment of love, if, indeed, the sentiment he awakens did not seem to partake of a yet purer sentiment, were that possible,—but nameless from its excellency. Friendly he is, and holds his friends by bearings as strict in their tenderness and consideration as are the laws of his thinking,—as prompt and kindly equitable,—neighborly always, and as apt for occasions as he is strenuous against meddling with others in things not his.

I know of nothing more creditable to his greatness than the thoughtful regard, approaching to reverence, by which he has held for many years some of the best persons of his time, living at a distance, and wont to make their annual pilgrimage, usually on foot, to the master,—a devotion very rare in these times of personal indifference, if not of confessed unbelief in persons and ideas.

He has been less of a housekeeper than most, has harvested more wind and storm, sun and sky; abroad night and day with his leash of keen scents, hounding any game stirring, and running it down, for certain, to be spread on the dresser of his page, and served as a feast to the sound intelligences, before he has done with it. We have been accustomed to consider him the salt of things so long that they must lose their savor without his to season them. And when he goes hence, then Pan is dead, and Nature sailing through-out.

His friend sings him thus, with the advantages of his Walden to show him in Nature:—

“It is not far beyond the Village church,
After we pass the wood that skirts the road,
A Lake,—the blue-eyed Walden, that doth
smile
Most tenderly upon its neighbor Pines;
And they, as if to recompense this love,
In double beauty spread their branches
forth.
This Lake has tranquil loveliness and
breadth,
And, of late years, has added to its charms;
For one attracted to its pleasant edge
Has built himself a little Hermitage,
Where with much piety he passes life.

“More fitting place I cannot fancy now,
For such a man to let the line run off
The mortal reel,—such patience hath the
Lake,
Such gratitude and cheer is in the Pines.
But more than either lake or forest's depths
This man has in himself: a tranquil man,
With sunny sides where well the fruit is
ripe,
Good front and resolute bearing to this life,
And some serener virtues, which control
This rich exterior prudence,—virtues high,
That in the principles of Things are set,
Great by their nature, and consigned to him,
Who, like a faithful Merchant, does account
To God for what he spends, and in what
way.
Thrice happy art thou, Walden, in thyself!
Such purity is in thy limpid springs,—
In those green shores which do reflect in
thee,
And in this man who dwells upon thy edge,
A holy man within a Hermitage.
May all good showers fall gently into thee,
May thy surrounding forests long be spared,
And may the Dweller on thy tranquil marge
There lead a life of deep tranquillity,
Pure as thy Waters, handsome as thy Shores,
And with those virtues which are like the
Stars!”