IN THE spring of nineteen hundred and five I first heard of Van Dearing Perrine. I sat with a friend watching the splendor of a glorious sunset over the Palisades, those towering cliffs along the Hudson. He spoke with glowing enthusiasm of Perrine as a young and unknown American painter, who had chosen for his theme the solemn grandeur of Nature’s elemental forces amid the romantic, rugged glory of the Palisades. His enthusiasm was overwhelming and inspiring, for he was, I discovered later, a typical member of a small band of enthusiasts who hailed the new artist with unbounded delight. Later, when I saw an exhibition of Perrine’s work, I agreed with their belief in him, for I saw that he had developed in his painting a strange spiritual quality that promised to add a new element to our landscape art.

Since the first view of his work in the New Gallery, I have been enabled to see practically all that Van Dearing Perrine has painted; to see him at work and to enter into intimate friendship with him. And now that I know something of the great religious purpose which inspires his brush, how every stroke is a reverent expression of his worship of the vital relationship which unites external nature to the deepest and holiest spiritual experience of man, I understand something of that force in his gloomy, dramatic, challenging pictures which distinguishes them from all other landscapes. Perrine is essentially a poet and a mystic. His attitude toward Nature is that of the poet seeking to interpret the mysterious hidden sources of movement and power, rather than that of the painter trying to convey a description of the landscape.

One summer afternoon, as we strolled through the little cedar grove and garden by his summer studio, on Long Island, I asked the painter to tell me why he painted so many storm-scenes. I was anxious to discover, if possible, why one so tender and sympathetic
in his attitude toward all life should revel in the fiercest and harshest moods of Nature. I had seen him glorying in the warm sunlight, rejoicing in the play of light upon the foliage and watching with the enthusiasm of a born naturalist the play of the birds. Clearly there was nothing morbid in his attitude toward Nature; some other explanation must be sought for the fact that he chooses to paint bare, frost-scarred rocks, cold moonlight stillness, storms, menacing clouds, with hardly ever a touch of verdant green or the play of caressing sunlight upon the foliage. As we strolled through the garden he plucked a flower and held it up: "See, this blossom is wonderfully beautiful to me," he said, "just as wonderful and just as beautiful as you or me. But it does not occur to me to paint a picture of it. Clearly the best I could do in that way, the best that any man could do, would be no more than a colored description, a more or less faithful imitation, of the flower. That I do not think worth while. But to interpret the meaning of the flower to others as I feel it, to make others understand the emotions and thoughts produced in my mind by the flower, is another matter.

"So with my pictures of the Palisades. It is not my purpose to paint the surface of things which all may see, unaided by imagination. To imitate the outward and visible forms of Nature, to paint faithful descriptions of the Palisades, accurate in form and color, is a form of landscape art which does not make the slightest appeal to me. Great rocks, great trees, great rivers of themselves mean very little to me, except as symbols of a great Universal Power, and Eternal Vital Principle, which makes and shapes tree and rock and river equally with myself. It is thus that I feel in this great Power—call it Eternal Motion, if you like—something linking me to all the universe, even to the remotest star, and linking all to myself. When I feel that I am awed and reverent. The whole world appears to me as one vast miracle, and I am part of the whole. It is this stupendous miracle of creation which takes possession of my thoughts and compels me to seek some form of expression, as men have sought in all ages. Some have found their means of expression in poetry, others in philosophy; I find mine in painting. The tiniest grain of sand upon the shore, the humblest flower in the field and the single dewdrop are just as wonderful as the highest cliff, the mightiest tree or the fiercest storm. Back of them all is the irresistible urge of the Universal Impulse. Yesterday there was a storm. The clouds gathered, the wind raged and hurled everything before it, but I could not think of the storm apart from myself. It spoke to
me only of the immensity and vastness of the whole of which I am part. What I try to do is to register a principle, to express something of that deep, reverent emotion, using such forms as seem to me best fitted to convey the solemn grandeur of it to others."

It is this feeling which Perrine possesses in common with the great poets. Byron, glorying in the thunder-storm over Jura, cries:

"Let me be
A sharer of thy fierce and far delight—
A portion of the tempest and of thee!"

Of the same spirit is Shelley's fine pantheism, as seen, for instance, in the invocation beginning:

"Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood!"

and Wordsworth's poetry is full of the same feeling as Perrine's painting. From it might be gathered wonderful lines appropriate to some of the pictures. This, for example, might be applied to the canvas called "Getting Firewood," showing the figures of two men struggling up the winding road of the Palisades on a moonlit night:

"With the din
Smitten, the precipices rang aloud;
The leafless trees and every icy crag
Tinkled like iron; while far distant hills
Into the tumult sent an alien sound
Of melancholy."

Perrine is exceedingly fond of Wordsworth and loves to quote the lines beginning—

"Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her."

Yet, if I were to be called upon to select from the whole range of poetry a motto to express the spirit of his work, I think I should turn to Whitman, the prophet-poet who so stoutly sounded the gospel of "man and art with Nature fused again." The painter has much in common with the "good gray poet," even the broad, free treatment of his canvas suggesting the freedom of Whitman's verse forms. And both poet and painter acknowledge the—

"Urge and urge and urge, always the procreant urge of the world."

Most of Perrine's painting is done in the winter, when the faces of the rocks are visible and the trees are stripped bare. Opposite Spuyten Duyvil, at a bend in the winding road, midway up the cliffs, stands a quaint little two-storied stone house.
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Formerly it served as school-house and church the needs of a small settlement down on the narrow shore-front. By virtue of an arrangement with the Palisades Commissioner, Perrine occupies this useful house during the winter months, the upper story, which was formerly used as a church, forming one of the most delightful little studios to be found anywhere. The pulpit and some of the old numbered pews form part of the furniture. In front there is an almost vertical drop, while at the back of the house the cliff rises like a great wall. A more romantic spot could hardly be imagined. In the summer time, when the cliffs are covered with vegetation, when the forms of the trees are made tame and uninteresting by their dense foliage, Perrine finds the place dull and oppressive. Then he hies away to Long Island, where he paints comparatively little, spending most of his time cultivating his small garden-patch. But in the winter, when the gaunt, gnarled, stark naked trees stand out against gray skies, when the river below is frozen over and the crevices and hollows of the cliffs are filled with snow, upon which the moonlight casts the spirit of mystery, Perrine lives in intimate association with all, an ardent Nature-worshipper aiming ever to express on canvas the result of his contemplation of the Eternal cosmic spirit. When the first grey rifts of dawn break the blackness of night, he is alone with the elemental forces in Nature’s temple, and in the “solemn midnight’s tingling silentness,” he is there, a veritable priest and interpreter of mysteries.

Perrine’s methods are as unique as his achievements. Most of his pictures are painted from rough sketches made in the open. In the case of his nocturnes, the sketches are made with white chalk and charcoal upon pieces of rough brown paper. These are transferred to a large blackboard in the studio, somewhat developed, and from there transferred to the canvas. Rarely is there any vivid coloring, most of the pictures being painted in dark, almost gloomy tones. In combination with the dramatic conception, the fine daring and spiritual ecstasy the result is almost invariably remarkable for its realism. His “First Snowfall” and “Dawn—Stormy Morning” are notable examples of this intimate and forceful interpretation.

NATURALLY, having started out upon an almost untrodden path, Perrine found it by no means an easy one to travel. The sharp thorns of poverty and discouragement have been plentifully strewn along the way, and the grim dragon, Despair, has had to be encountered at every turn. Though the fact is not
Owned by Mrs. D. P. Kimball.

"THE TWO SHORES." BY VAN DEARING PERKINE.
Owned by The New Gallery.

"GETTING FIREWOOD." BY VAN DEARING PERRINE.
This Picture Is Owned by the White House.

"THE PALISADES," BY VAN DEARING FERRINE.
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generally known outside the circle of his friends, I am not betraying any confidence, I think, in saying that he has literally staked his life in the struggle. A magnificent physical endowment was almost wrecked before the first dawn of success and appreciation. Happily, the physical ills were not permanent, and during the past year or two he has regained much of his former vigor and strength. While he has paid the price in suffering which art demands of all her children, he has not been in the least embittered by the experience. Calm, courageous and serene as one whose “feet are mortised in the granite” and who can “feel the amplitude of Time,” he never rails or complains, but views his lot with quiet, gentle dignity.

Van Dearing Perrine is thirty-eight years of age. He was born in Kansas, and early experienced the poignant struggle of poverty. He learned the plastering trade and followed it for some years, dreaming the while of art. Fighting always against adversity and sometimes against sheer hunger, he reached Texas, dreaming of art. In Dallas, Texas, he saw a cheap chromo in a window, poor enough judged by the canons of art-criticism, but it served to fire his ambition and cause him to sail for New York. He was dreaming of art, and hoped to find some way to study it in the great metropolis. When he reached New York he lost no time in joining an art school, but after a little while found himself hampered and restricted there. Perhaps the school methods were wrong; he would try another school. But the results were the same. So he left school and went on with his painting, always feeling the joy of opportunity rather than of achievement. He says today “There is nothing in my work which I consider the best I can ever do. That part of my work which is best requires no education or cult for its understanding—because I have solved nothing. It rather requires one who feels the presence of the great unsolved—who has gazed out at life in hungry wonderment. Life is great. Art is itself nothing. It is but the wake of a great soul—the means whereby we may trace the flight of a great mind through our sky and watch its trail long after it has passed beyond our horizon. What counts is not the achievement, but the effort to achieve. No artist ever attains the end toward which he aims, for the effort serves not only to attain what was seen, but at the same time to produce a greater power of vision—an increase of spiritual insight and capacity. It is not so much the thing done by you as what the doing of it does for you.”

Perrine belongs to no art societies, he does not bother with their exhibitions. The only body of which he is a member is the Society
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for the Preservation of American Forests. Each season he exhibits his latest work, and the event is always eagerly welcomed by an ever-growing body of enthusiastic friends. One of his most ardent admirers is Richard Watson Gilder, who has hailed him as “the most original figure in American landscape art today.” One of his pictures hangs in the White House at Washington, another in the Carnegie Institute at Pittsburg and many others in private galleries of some note. Altogether, there is no more significant figure in American art today than this gentle mystic and Nature-worshipper. Whether we regard his achievement up-to-date, or think of it in connection with his philosophy and so hazard a guess as to the future that awaits him, it is at least certain that Van Dearing Perrine is destined to exert an important influence upon American art, and sure of an abiding place in its history.

AS A BIRD IN SPRINGTIME

A

S a bird in springtime
Warbles forth its welcome
To the apples blossoms
Heralding the summer,
So my heart is singing
When I hear your footsteps
Call across the stillness
Of the moonlit garden.

As the rains of autumn
In the dark November
Weep against the windows
Of my lonely dwelling,
So my tears are falling
When you turn to leave me,
And I know the summer
Of our joy is ended.

Elsa Barker.