“THE HANDLE OF AN AXE:” BY WILL LEVINGTON COMFORT

HERE is a different love of Nature. We cry aloud in our surface ecstasies—that the old Mother was never so beautiful, her contours and colorings. We travel far for a certain vista, or journey alone, as if making a pilgrimage, to a certain nave of woodland where a loved hand has touched us. . . . But this lifted love of nature is different from the Pipes of Pan, from all sensuous beauty. The love of Nature that I mean is different even from wooings and winnings, and all that beauteous bewilderment of sex-opposites—different from all save the immortal romances.

I wonder if I can suggest what is in the heart; it cannot be more than a suggestion for these things have not to do with words. You who have felt it may know. In the moments of its coming you were very far from the weight and the symbols of Nature, but close to her animating spirit. . . . I walked for hours alone, through different small communities of beech and oak and elm. On a slope before my eyes, there was a sudden low clearing of vapor, as if a curtain were lifted, and I saw a thicket of dogwood in the mystery of resurrection, the stone of the sepulchre rolled away.

I do not know to this day if they were really there. I have never found them again. . . . I was sitting here one fall night, a south wind straight from the great water, and the mignonette came in and lingeringly passed. The garden was behind to the north. I went to it and it gave me nothing, moved around it, and there was no respiration of that heaven-breath. Yet the Oneness, the very spirit of life, had touched me from the miracle, like the ineffable presence of the dogwood in bloom on the fairy slope.

The love of Nature, the different love, is a matter of our own receptivity. If we were brave enough, or sweet enough within, we would not require the touch of the senses, nor Nature’s superb master-strokes to awaken us. We would not need to leave our rooms, for it is all here—in the deep gleam of polished strength of the hickory axe-handle, in the low light of the blade, in stone wall and oaken sill, in leather and brass and pottery, in the odor and glow of burning...
wood, and veritably massed upon the sweeping distance from the window. It is because we are coarse and fibrous and confined in the sick weight of flesh that we do not stand in a kind of creative awe before the lowliest mystery of our physical sight.

I WOULD ask you never to forget that the handle of an axe is a poem. If you cannot tell why at this instant, hold fast to the fact that you knew once, that you learned it straight from God who gave the secret to Nature, who, in her turn, produced it for you. I ask you never to forget that you gave it to others. Hold fast to it—and if you are brave enough and sweet enough within, it will come to you again.

Do you know that there is a different fragrance, a different manner of burning to each tree, whose parts you bring to the open camp-fire or your own hearth; that some woods shriek at this second death after the cutting, that others pass with gracious calm, and still others give up their dearest reality at the moment of breaking under the fire, like the released spirit of a saint that was articulate heretofore only in beautiful deeds?

The willow burns with quiet meager warmth, like a lamb led to slaughter, but with innocence feigned, keeping her vain secrets to the last. The oak resists, as he resists the axe, having spent all his energy in building a stout and perfect body, proud of its twisted arms and gnarled hands. The pine rebels, and noisily to the swift end, saying: "I do not believe in cremation; I believe in breaking down alone and apart, as I lived. I am clean without the fire. You should let me alone, and now I will not let you think nor talk of real things until I am gone." . . . Each with its separate fragrance and story—the elm, the silentest and sweetest of all. . . . The elm has forgotten her body in spreading her grace to the stars; the elm for aspiration, loving the starlight so well that she will not hide it from the ground; most beautiful of all in winter, save the beech, her burning a swift and saintly passage, after a noble life. The maple warms you in spite of herself, giving up her secrets which are not all clean—a lover of fatness, her shade too dense, a hater of winter, because she is bare, and the secret of all ugliness in her nudity. (The true tree-lover is never a stranger to the winter woods.) And the mothering beech, with her soft incense, her heart filling the room with warmth and light, her will to warm the world; the mothering beech, a healer and a shelterer, a lover like the Magdalen whose sin was loving much. She gives her body to gods and men, and most sweetly to the fire,—her passing, naked and unashamed.
It was the poet Coleridge who called the silver birch by that fanciful and gracious title "The Lady of the Woods"—a name that springs to mind each time our eyes are gladdened by a glimpse of white bark and silvery gray leaves among the woodland's darker trunks and foliage.
SURELY IT IS MORE THAN A MERE ACCIDENT THAT THE BRANCHES OF THE TREES—OF THIS WIND-TORN PINE, FOR INSTANCE—SEEM LIKE THE ARMS OF NATURE STRETCHED OUT IN SILENT COMRADESHIP AND INVITATION TOWARD THE CITY-PRISONED SONS OF MEN: "IF THEY BECKON TO YOU," SAYS WILL COMFORT, "THE TREES ON THE HORIZON (AND GOD BE WITH YOU, IF THERE ARE NONE), IF THEY SEEM TO BE CALLING TO YOU, DO NOT FAIL THEM, DO NOT WAIT TOO LONG."
THIS GNARLED AND TWISTED CYPRESS THAT WITHSTANDS SO STURDILY THE WINDS OF OUR ROCKY WESTERN COAST, SEEMS TO HAVE GATHERED TO ITSELF, IN THE FIGHT FOR EXISTENCE UPON THE EDGE OF THE BLUFF, AN INDIVIDUALITY LITTLE SHORT OF HUMAN: THERE IS A FIERCE, WHIMSICAL SPIRIT, TOO, IN THE CURIOUS TRUNK AND BRANCHES, THAT REMINDS ONE OF THE GNOME-HAUNTED TREES ARTHUR RACKHAM DELIGHTS TO DRAW FOR FAIRY-LOVING FOLK.
These tall, stately poplars carry "the beauty of the sylvan world high into the air." As Hamerton says, they are, to other trees, what towers in architecture are to houses: green church spires of nature, pointing steadfastly upward, they seem like perpetual symbols of aspiration toward the light.
THE different love of Nature. The child knows it instinctively. Young men and maidens forget it in the heat of themselves, but it comes back to them again, if they grow old decently. It lives in rock and thicket, in the voice of running water, in every recess of woodland, and arch of shore—not the Pipes of Pan, but the mysteries of God; not sensuousness, but the awakening of a spirit that has slumbered—the illumination, sudden and splendid, that all is One—that Nature is the plane of manifestation for the infinite and perfect story of God; that Nature is the table which God has filled to overflowing—this is a suggestion, a beginning of the lifted love of Nature.

If they beckon to you—the trees on the horizon (and God be with you, if there are none); if they seem to be calling to you, do not fail them, do not wait too long. For surely that time will come, when they will cease to call to your heart. They will not have changed, but you will have gone too far back among the spectres, among the illusions of detached things, to know that they are calling. And be very sure that you will never find the sons of God in the eyes of passing men—if you have forgotten our Mother.

SPRING NIGHTS

SPRING nights have come again, with their old pity,
Spring nights of simple fragrance, to the sad city.

See how the long lanes filled with blue lights
Wake to a strange rapture in the Spring nights!

Almost I think I heard in the hushed dark,
Down yonder thoroughfare, close to the park,

Voices of "ghostly birds, bright after rain,
Singing the city’s soul clean of its pain.

Spring nights, glad Spring nights, with their old pity,
Ah! how we need them here in the sad city!

CHARLES HANSON TOWNE.