

THE AMATEUR NATURE-LOVER

It is possible that an education entirely urban is not the best conceivable preparation for descriptive articles upon the country. On the other hand, your professional nature-lover is sometimes a little over-familiar with his subject. He knows the names of all the things, and he does not spare you. Besides, he is subtle. The prominent features are too familiar to him, and he goes into details. What respectable townsman, for instance, knows what "scabiosa" is? It sounds very unpleasant. Then the professional nature-lover assumes that you know trees. No Englishman can tell any tree from any other tree, except a very palpable oak or poplar. So that we may at least, as an experiment, allow a good Londoner to take his unsophisticated eyes out into the sweet country for once, and try his skill at nature-loving, though his botany has been learned over the counter of flower-shops, and his zoology on Saturday afternoons when they have the band in the Gardens. He makes his way, then, over by Epsom Downs towards Sutton, trying to assimilate his mood to the proper flavour of appreciation as he goes, and with a little notebook in the palm of his hand to assist an ill-trained memory. And the burthen of his song is of course the autumn tints.

The masses of trees towards Epsom and Ewell, with the red houses and Elizabethan façades peeping through their interstices, contain, it would seem, every conceivable colour, except perhaps sky-blue; there are

brilliant yellow trees, and a kind of tree of the most amazing gamboge green, almost the green of spring come back, and tan-coloured trees, deep brown, red, and deep crimson trees. Here and there the wind has left its mark, and the grey-brown branches and their purple tracery of twigs, with a suggestion of infinite depth behind, show through the rents in the leafy covering. There are deep green trees--the amateur nature-lover fancies they may be yews--with their dense warm foliage arranged in horizontal masses, like the clouds low down in a sunset; and certain other evergreens, one particularly, with a bluish-green covering of upstanding needles, are intensely conspicuous among the flame tints around. On a distant church tower, and nearer, disputing the possession of a gabled red house with a glowing creeper, is some ivy; and never is the perennial green of ivy so delightful as it is now, when all else is alight with the sombre fire of the sunset of the year....

The amateur nature-lover proceeds over the down, appreciating all this as hard as he can appreciate, and anon gazing up at the grey and white cloud shapes melting slowly from this form to that, and showing lakes, and wide expanses, and serene distances of blue between their gaps. And then he looks round him for a zoological item. Underfoot the grass of the down is recovering from the summer drought and growing soft and green again, and plentiful little flattened snail shells lie about, and here and there a late harebell still nods in the breeze. Yonder bolts a rabbit, and then something whizzes by the amateur nature-lover's ear.

They shoot here somewhere, he remembers suddenly; and then looking

round, in a palpitating state, is reassured by the spectacle of a lone golfer looming over the brow of the down, and gesticulating black and weird against the sky. The Londoner, with an abrupt affectation of nonchalance, flings himself flat upon his back, and so remains comparatively safe until the golfer has passed. These golfers are strange creatures, rabbit-coloured, except that many are bright red about the middle, and they repel and yet are ever attracted by a devil in the shape of a little white ball, which leads them on through toothed briars, sharp furzes, pricking goss, and thorns; cursing the thing, weeping even, and anon laughing at their own foolish rambling; muttering, heeding no one to the right or left of their career,--demented creatures, as though these balls were their souls, that they ever sought to lose, and ever repented losing. And silent, ever at the heel of each, is a familiar spirit, an eerie human hedgehog, all set about with walking-sticks, a thing like a cylindrical umbrella-stand with a hat and boots and a certain suggestion of leg. And so they pass and are gone.

Rising, the amateur nature-lover finds he has been reclining on a puff-ball. These puff-balls are certainly the most remarkable example of adaptation to circumstances known to English botanists. They grow abundantly on golf grounds, and are exactly like golf-balls in external appearance. They are, however, Pharisees and whited sepulchres, and within they are full of a soft mess of a most unpleasant appearance--the amateur nature-lover has some on him now--which stuff contains the spores. It is a case of what naturalists call "mimicry"--one of nature's

countless adaptations. The golf-player smites these things with force, covering himself with ridicule--and spores, and so disseminating this far-sighted and ingenious fungus far and wide about the links.

The amateur nature-lover passes off the down, and towards Banstead village. He is on the watch for characteristic objects of the countryside, and rustling through the leaves beneath a chestnut avenue he comes upon an old boot. It is a very, very old boot, all its blacking washed off by the rain, and two spreading chestnut leaves, yellow they are with blotches of green, with their broad fingers extended, rest upon it, as if they would protect and altogether cover the poor old boot in its last resting-place. It is as if Mother Nature, who lost sight of her product at the tanner's yard, meant to claim her own trampled child again at last, after all its wanderings. So we go on, noting a sardine tin gleaming brightly in the amber sunlight, through a hazel hedge, and presently another old boot. Some hawthorn berries, some hoary clematis we notice--and then another old boot. Altogether, it may be remarked, in this walk the amateur nature-lover saw eleven old boots, most of them dropped in the very sweetest bits of hedge tangle and grassy corner about Banstead.

It is natural to ask, "Whence come all these old boots?" They are, as everyone knows, among the commonest objects in a country walk, so common, indeed, that the professional nature-lover says very little about them. They cannot grow there, they cannot be dropped from above--they are distinctly earth-worn boots. I have inquired of my own

domestic people, and caused inquiry to be made in a large number of households, and there does not appear to be any regular custom of taking boots away to remote and picturesque spots to abandon them. Some discarded boots of my own were produced, but they were quite different from the old boot of the outer air. These home-kept old boots were lovely in their way, hoary with mould running into the most exquisite tints of glaucophane and blue-grey, but it was a different way altogether from that of the wild boot.

A friend says, that these boots are cast away by tramps. People, he states, give your tramp old boots and hats in great profusion, and the modesty of the recipient drives him to these picturesque and secluded spots to effect the necessary change. But no nature-lover has ever observed the tramp or tramp family in the act of changing their clothes, and since there are even reasons to suppose that their garments are not detachable, it seems preferable to leave the wayside boot as a pleasant flavouring of mystery to our ramble. Another point, which also goes to explode this tramp theory, is that these countryside boots never occur in pairs, as any observer of natural history can testify....

So our Cockney Jefferies proceeds, presently coming upon a cinder path. They use cinders a lot about Sutton, to make country paths with; it gives you an unexpected surprise the first time it occurs. You drop suddenly out of a sweetly tangled lane into a veritable bit of the Black Country, and go on with loathing in your soul for your fellow-creatures. There is also an abundance of that last product of civilisation, barbed

wire. Oh that I were Gideon! with thorns and briers of the wilderness
would I teach these elders of Sutton! But a truce to dark thoughts!

We take our last look at the country from the open down above Sutton.
Blue hills beyond blue hills recede into the remote distance; from
Banstead Down one can see into Oxfordshire. Windsor Castle is in minute
blue silhouette to the left, and to the right and nearer is the Crystal
Palace. And closer, clusters red-roofed Sutton and its tower, then
Cheam, with its white spire, and further is Ewell, set in a variegated
texture of autumn foliage. Water gleams--a silver thread--at Ewell, and
the sinking sun behind us catches a window here and there, and turns it
into an eye of flame. And so to Sutton station and home to Cockneydom
once more.