

## THE BEAUTIES OF NATURE



IN one of the sweetest valleys of Cumberland, far up beyond that celebrated vale of Troutbeck—in fact, a very beautiful valley—lived a careful and sincere sheep. The mountains were not crested with flame at dawn, nor veiled with mist at evening, in vain for her. In her vale and about it Nature was at once radiant and sober. On the one hand an isle-strawn mere lay laughing, cradled in the bosom of the mighty hills: these were stern of temperament and laughed but seldom; even when repentant skies crowned them with rainbows about their tangled foreheads, they drew down their brows, and, recalling their Point of View, still frowned. The grandeur of their awful steeps was sweet in harmony where mosses and scant grass cloaked them; and stranger where the patches of bracken mottled their gray nakedness. Leftward and deeper yet, the fairest, smoothest valley, with fields so green, so green; green touched according to the season with pink, with mauve; touched with yellow, with gold; touched with I know not what of all that was loveliest and best. Torrents rushed in gorges of the steep slopes, bubbling and all but dust for their violence, or loitering in cool, deep, faintly swirling pools, shaded or open to the magic sun, whose rays came to play with the rilllets in pure fire, or damped through shimmering green of fern frond and dainty leaf. And down below, a timid riband of peace parting the giants who had stood threatening one another since the world was founded, ran a very brook of Eden; its purity mocked the bluest noon, its glance was brighter than rain in summer: it was paved with gold sand and silver pebble. Along its woolly fringes the brightest flowers grew on stalks more slender than anywhere else; and here the richest moths balanced themselves on the quivering stems, forecasting in secret accident the blossoms of Paradise. With the single exception of glaciers, no beauty was wanting in this valley which a sheep could think of to desire.

In the fulness of accomplished time God sent this sheep a lamb for her own. Herself was white, as often depicted in literature; God had given her lambkin black legs and tail, a black face and most dutiful eyes. Long the sheep tended and watched her young, suckling it with joyous, over-brimming tags. Then tenderest grass was alternated (of tender grass there was no lack in that fat vale). Sometimes the lamb grew faint and querulous, trotting after his mother with cries not all content. Then the sheep tinged her kindness with severity; for she was sincere, and the time comes when a lambkin must think of becoming a lamb.

“My child,” she would say, “admire the Beauties of Nature,” and thereon would follow indications suited to a juvenile understanding, the contours of the crags against green or blue, the swooning dip of the kindly hills. So the lambkin became a lamb, wise in his order, wotting well for what he had been born into the world.

In the valley there was an old father. He never spoke to the lamb, but

he looked as though he knew a great deal. The lamb was afraid of him, for he had a terrible way. He was horned ; that was not curious, but each of his horns grew out in a spiral from his head ; and his manner was, when he looked, to look through this spiral with one forbidding eye. No wonder the lamb was afeared.

At night all the sheep, with their lambs and the old father, went to their fold which lay lower down, a rock-piled fortress of two apartments, one of which was larger than the other. The lamb did not know why, but always the whole flock went into one of the rooms, generally the smaller ; they never shared them. The openings were very narrow, for one only to pass at a time, but the sheep always went through two, and sometimes ten, abreast. All rose very early in the morning ; and with restored energy scrambled high up the slopes, so that looking over their shoulders from time to time they could see the level sun driving loitering night down the vale.

"I have been wondering all night, mamma," said the lamb one morning, with that mealiness of demeanour proper to obedient children, "I have been wondering all night. . . ."

The sheep looked earnest, for he had slept soundly.

"I have been wondering all night whence I came into this happy valley, to be my mother's joy by filial obedience, and admire the Beauties of Nature."

The sheep was not embarrassed for an answer. But she looked round with care, that marked circumspection might give the lamb a sense of the dignity of their conversation. The direct answer was simple: that he came from God; but, considering the extreme youth of her child, she said, pointing with her ear:

"Do you not see yonder, where the mere head of a lamb is seen above the herbage, or yon where head and shoulders are seen, or there again added a white fleecy back ; and here are you and I walking about, free and happy, the fairest of God's creatures. Therefore, my son, let us eat, and from time to time look about us to admire the Beauties of Nature. The mountains, children of time, are emblems of eternity ; the white, shining lake we see down there is a symbol of truth. The sky above us is a beautiful figure of changing life, which is always blue again sooner or later, however many clouds cross its bright face. Lastly for the present, the grass, for ever green, means love, which is the best of all. Now, son, let us eat."

This wisdom filled the lamb with such sobriety and reflection that he knelt down to eat his breakfast ; and, as it was more convenient, so continued for a long time. The sheep said nothing, but seeing these things, she thought with her heart.\*

"And whither, mamma," asked the lamb, on another occasion, "if the question be a right one, do we go?"

"The question is a right one," answered the sheep gravely, "and in a sense the answer is writ on all we see about us, on every feature of the face of pious, happy Nature. And, with more precision, thus much may be said: If we are good and eat a great deal, we go away singing in joyous bands, led by piping hinds and tanned boys, into valleys more fair than this, though

\* Vauvenargues : Les grandes pensées viennent du cœur.

now that may not seem possible, where grass is greener and moist, though the sky above is always blue. It has been wisely said that there is no telling the wonder and contentment which await us."

These assurances almost completed the lamb's education, at least, so far as his mother was concerned; but still they conversed together as loving dam and dutiful child. One day the pasturer came into the fold, and taking the lamb, not without rudeness, painted a fine legible "P. F." on his white back. The lamb resented this and showed a certain quarrelsomeness, objecting to his mother that a red "P. F." was a blot on the face of Nature.

"Peter Fancy," laughed the sheep, in matronly banter, "there are other things beside Nature, Sir Peter."

Then, little by little, the lamb trotted less and less closely at his mother's heels. On occasion he was known to dictate to her, and his observations were sometimes conducted without her connivance, and communicated first by him to "people of his own age." He gave himself moods, being sometimes archaic, and sometimes merely pastoral. And last of all, when by chance they met, mother and son conversed only in monosyllables. The lamb had found his own pursuits, and he followed them.

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