

CHAPTER XIX

SOME ENGLISH TREE POETRY

A COUPLE of years ago I was requested by some of the students attending this class to give a lecture on the subject of trees in English poetry. An opportunity has now come to attempt something of that kind; but I am afraid that it will not be a very successful effort. The request inspired me to make researches that I should not otherwise have thought of making; and I was rather surprised at the results. One of these was the discovery that English poets have given very little attention to the subject of trees. The Japanese word for tree and for plant does not seem to be very different; perhaps when I was requested to give a lecture on tree poetry it was not intended really that I should limit the lecture to the subject of trees only—leaving plants out of the question. However I took the word literally; and did confine my searching to the subject of trees—big trees; and I am very glad for doing so, because I learned that there is very little about trees in English poetry. Nor is that all. I think we may say that the amount of poetry on this subject in almost any European literature is rather small.

What is the reason? I am not sure of the reason; I will not venture any opinion about it—except to say that I think we should have to go back to Greek and Roman civilization in order to find the real cause. Anyhow Western poets have chiefly turned their attention to flowers and plants, rather than trees. You will find thousands of poems about roses and lilies, and violets and daisies, and garden plants of many kinds. But you will not find much poetry about big trees—except in scattered lines, or occasional stanzas in long poems treating of other subjects. Perhaps you

will ask how we can draw a line between plants and trees—in relation to classification of poetry. I think the best answer to that sensible question would be this:—Let us consider, as trees, only those growths which contain wood in the stem. By so doing we can easily establish a line between the poetry of plants and the poetry of trees.

Usually when English poets make poems about trees they celebrate the trees on account of some historic or romantic association. For instance there is Tennyson's poem about the famous oak. There is very little about the beauty and power of the tree in itself, but a great deal about things that happened, while the tree was still alive. Tennyson is not alone in this respect. Other English poets have restricted their attention to trees in just the same way. Perhaps one reason may be that very few English trees are remarkable for the beauty of their flowers; and it is the flower especially that attracts the European poet. We have no cherry trees, for example, in England like the cherry trees of Japan. The most beautiful of the blossoming trees in England is perhaps the apple tree; an apple tree in full bloom would be quite as beautiful as the Japanese cherry tree, if the flowers opened before the leaves began to bud. The extraordinary beauty of Japanese cherry trees in blossom is chiefly owing to the fact that, in the majority of species, the blossoms appear before the leaves—so that the whole tree becomes like one great blossom, or white and pink clouds of blossoms. Nevertheless English apple trees and other fruit trees in bloom are very fine: why are they not written about? Well, such trees are usually to be seen only on fruit farms or in private gardens—not in situations that help to make a landscape beautiful. Perhaps the most celebrated English flowering tree is the hawthorn; and this is often praised by poets because it happens to be placed in lanes and on public roads, much after the fashion of the Japanese cherry tree. Still any complete poems addressed to such flowering trees are not easy to find.

I should not like you to think that cherry flowers are

totally unknown to English poets; but it is a curious fact that the only noteworthy poem which I have been able to find touching a cherry tree is a poem about a wild cherry tree and it is by George Meredith. If he had only seen the garden cherry trees, I do not think that he would have written much about them. But a wild cherry blossoming alone in the wood is a beautiful sight. And this poem has celebrated it in wonderful verse. Also it is very curious how he came to write about a wild cherry tree. The poem is about a man who has suffered great sorrow in consequence of the death of the mother of his children: he is almost in despair, ready to doubt all things. But unexpectedly one morning he sees in blossom a wild cherry tree at which he and she used to look with joy in other and happier times. Thinking about the beautiful tree and its blossoms leads him to a happier and better frame of mind. The poem is called "A Faith on Trial."

Now gazed I where, sole upon gloom,
 As flower-bush in sun-specked crag,
 Up the spine of the double combe
 With yew-boughs heavily cloaked,
 A young apparition shone:
 Known, yet wonderful, white
 Surpassingly; doubtfully known,
 For it struck as the birth of Light:
 Even Day from the dark unyoked.
 It waved like a pilgrim flag
 O'er processional penitents flown
 When of old they broke rounding yon spine:
 O the pure wild-cherry in bloom!

* * * *

The forest's white virgin;
 She, the white wild cherry, a tree,
 Earth-rooted, tangibly wood,
 Yet a presence throbbing alive;
 Nor she in our language dumb:
 A spirit born of a tree;
 Because earth-rooted alive.

This is the kind of verse justly called obscure,—and it reminds us very much of Browning's obscurity in his worst moments. But when we take the trouble to analyse either Browning or Meredith, in their difficult utterances, we generally get at beauty of some kind. And there is beauty here. You must understand that the poet is walking up a mountain path, with a great wood of yew trees before him on either side—such trees have a very dark foliage. And all at once at a turn of the path, he catches sight of a wild cherry tree in blossom—seeming astonishingly white against the almost black green foliage of the yews. Now we can paraphrase.

“Now I looked and saw, alone in the gloom—as one might see a brightly flowering plant in some place of dark rocks, illuminated by a single ray of sunshine—something very beautiful. I was looking up the ridge of a forked hill, which was all covered with dark yew trees; and against their darkness I saw the shining apparition,—like a beautiful luminous spirit. I knew the tree, indeed. I had seen it before; but now it seemed to me more wonderful than ever, more white, and almost like a newly discovered thing. It amazed me like a sudden creation of light in darkness,—like the separation of day from night might surprise the eyes of those angels who were present when God said, ‘Let there be light.’ It was like a white pilgrim flag above those dark yew trees,—above the endless procession of their sable shapes. In ancient times there actually were religious processions upon that hill; and they used to pass around the ridge of the hill, all robed in black, carrying banners above them. But no banner was more beautiful or more white than the beautiful wild cherry tree there upon the hill. And that white virgin of the forest, though only a tree rooted in the earth, and merely wood to the touch, was nevertheless most truly a living thing,—a shape all quivering with life. Only a tree—yet more than a tree to the eyes that can see, and to the heart that can feel: a spirit indeed, and not dumb, but able to speak to us in the language of souls, notwith-

standing the fact of being rooted in the ground.”

That is the meaning of the description, and you can imagine the nature of the meditation which follows. To the dreaming poet, that beautiful blossoming tree becomes an image of life. All life that we know issues from the earth—is, so to speak, related to clay—that is, either the beginning or the end of life is there. And just as, out of the common black clay, issues the tree that bears those beautiful flowers of purest white, so it may be that man, in spite of his apparent beginning on earth, may evolve some divine blossom of the spirit.

So you see that even in Western poetry, some beautiful thoughts have been suggested by the cherry tree. Meredith has written a great deal about the woods and trees: he is a great nature poet;—and the most famous of his philosophical poems, “The Woods of Westermain” is a description of human life under the simile of a haunted forest. I am not going to quote from it, because it does not exactly belong to the subject of this lecture; but I may quote to you a little poem of Meredith’s about pine woods,—or rather about the thoughts which come to a poet while walking under the pines. It is called “Dirge in Woods.”

A wind sways the pines,
 And below
 Not a breath of wild air;
 Still as the mosses that glow
 On the flooring and over the lines
 Of the roots here and there.
 The pine-tree drops its dead;
 They are quiet, as under the sea.
 Overhead, overhead
 Rushes life in a race,
 As the clouds the clouds chase;
 And we go,
 And we drop like the fruits of the tree,
 Even we,
 Even so.

Briefly paraphrased:—

“High up the pine-trees are rocking in the wind: but down below, among the great trunks, everything is quiet;—there are only dead leaves, and roots of trees and mosses crawling over the roots;—and here, into the dusk and silence, the pine-tree drops its dead leaves. All dead things that fall here, fall into a quiet like that of the bottom of the deep sea. But high up everything is alive and rushing,—birds are singing and flying; branches are bending and swaying; and, still higher up in the sky the clouds are running before the wind.

“Life is like this pine wood,—human life. On the surface all is motion and change; but under the surface is stillness and death.”

This seems an abrupt ending. It is intentionally abrupt. The poet does not think it necessary to remind us that it is out of death that all life grows,—just as, in the dark depths of the pine forest, it is out of the dust and decay of old trees and fallen leaves, and the clay of them, that the young trees grow.

Somebody especially asked me for a poem about maple trees. There are some, but scarcely any in English literature proper,—for in England the maple tree is not of the same kind as we have here; and you do not see the beautiful crimsons that make a Japanese maple wood one of the charming sights of autumn. It is rather the tendency of English foliage to become yellowish in autumn. I think you have seen a reference to this in Tennyson. But in America the maple trees become beautifully red in autumn; and American poets have written many things about them. Indeed in some parts of America and Canada the colours of autumn give extraordinary splendor to the forests. The American poet Lowell has a number of poems on trees, and among these I find two compositions on maples. One is a love poem; the other a meditative poem. And I shall quote the latter first—at least the best part of it.

THE MAPLE

The Maple puts her corals on in May,
 While loitering frosts about the lowlands cling,
 To be in tune with what the robins sing,
 Plastering new log-huts 'mid her branches gray;
 But when the Autumn southward turns away,
 Then in her veins burns most the blood of Spring,
 And every leaf, intensely blossoming,
 Makes the year's sunset pale the set of day.

In the month of May the maple tree first puts forth her coral pink buds, while the long lingering frosts of the season still makes the lowlands cold in the early morning. The tree seems anxious to share the joy of the season—that joy of life which expresses itself in the singing of the robins, as they make their little nests in the gray branches of the great tree,—nests plastered and made of little twigs, with the bark left upon them, so that they look like tiny huts. The tree is beautiful in spring; but that is not the time when it is most beautiful or most wonderful. It is in the latter part of autumn, when the cold season is approaching. Then the leaves of the maple become so splendidly red, that their autumn colour is even more beautiful to see than the red glow of sunset itself.

FANCY

UNDER THE OCTOBER MAPLES

What mean these banners spread,
 These paths with royal red
 So gaily carpeted?
 Comes there a prince to-day?
 Such footing were too fine
 For feet less argentine
 Than Dian's own or thine,
 Queen whom my tides obey.

Surely for thee are meant
 These hues so orient
 That with a sultan's tent

Each tree invites the sun;
Our Earth such homage pays,
So decks her dusty ways,
And keeps such holidays,
For me, and only one.

My brain shapes form and face,
Throbs with the rhythmic grace
And cadence of her pace
To all fine instincts true;
Her footsteps, as they pass,
Than moonbeams over grass
Fall lighter,—but, alas,
More insubstantial too!

The poet asks, as he looks at the maple forest in its fervid splendor, “What is the signification of all this magnificent colour? Red leaves cover the ground like a red carpet; and the foliage overhead is like some splendid awning. It is as though the forest has been decorating itself to receive a visit from somebody. But who can that somebody be? Such ‘footing’—i.e. such a carpeting—is too fine for any feet less silver-white than the feet of the moon or the feet of the ideal woman who influences the poet’s life even as the moon moves the tides of the sea.”

“Surely,” he says, “only for her can be meant this glorious display of Oriental colour—where each tree seems to invite the visit of the sun, as by offering him the crimson tent of a Sultan for a resting place.”

Imagination shapes for him the form and the face of the one person most worthy to enjoy the spectacle; perhaps memory enables him to hear even the musical step of her approach. But really these steps can make no sound in this world, any more than one can hear the falling of moonlight upon grass. Why?—we are not exactly told. Possibly the poet is referring to the dead woman about whom he has elsewhere written so many beautiful things. I imagine that this is the case, and that he is only trying to say to her: “How happy you would be if you could see these maples now

as I see them! and perhaps you do—but, alas! I cannot hear or see you now, because you no longer have a body!”

Lowell has also some long poems on oak trees and pine trees. The poems upon oak trees are not very remarkable: the stanzas were written when the poet was quite young,—besides, we need not go to American poets for poetry about oak trees. You can find much better poetry on the same subject in Tennyson. But his poem upon the pine tree, the gigantic pine tree of the American mountain slopes, is full of fine lines; and an Englishman could scarcely see anything resembling such pine trees in his own country. I shall quote a few stanzas.

TO A PINE-TREE

Far up on Katahdin thou towerest,
 Purple-blue with the distance and vast;
 Like a cloud o'er the lowlands thou lowerest,
 That hangs poised on a lull in the blast,
 To its fall leaning awful.

In the storm, like a prophet o'er-maddened,
 Thou singest and tosses thy branches;
 Thy heart with the terror is gladdened,
 Thou forebodes the dread avalanches,
 When whole mountains swoop vale-ward.

In the calm thou o'erstretchest the valleys
 With thine arms, as if blessings imploring,
 Like an old king led forth from his palace,
 When his people to battle are pouring
 From the city beneath him.

* * *

Spite of winter, thou keep'st thy green glory,
 Lusty father of Titans past number!
 The snow-flakes alone make thee hoary,
 Nestling close to thy branches in slumber,
 And thee mantling with silence.

The last stanza is the best; and the last line of that stanza is best of all. The idea of snow falling upon ever-green trees, with the result of making them more beautiful,

has often been expressed by poets; but the description of snow as wrapping trees in silence, will probably be new to some of you. It is as true as it is beautiful. Snow makes silence; and the poet is justified in speaking of a snow-covered pine as wrapped in a mantle of silence. In England, except in conservatories, and private gardens, you are not likely to see pine trees resembling either the great American pines or the Japanese pines. (When I say American pines, I mean the pines of the north; for the pines of the southern states, such as Georgia, are very different trees indeed, rising up straight as the masts of a ship.) English wild evergreens are better represented by such coniferous trees as firs, which, though related to the pine, form a very distinct variety. So English poets have little to say about what we call pines in Japan or in America; and when English poets do happen to celebrate pine trees—as Milton did, in describing the spear of the Archangel—the reference has been to the pine of Norway:—

His spear, to equal which the tallest pine
Hewn on Norwegian hills, to be the mast
Of some great ammiral, were but a wand.*

And when Browning wrote his fine line describing the pine trees “like black priests climbing the hill,” † he was speaking of European, but not of English pines. Fir trees, on the other hand, are often mentioned; and everybody should know the pretty verses by the poet Hood about the fir trees in the garden of the house in which he lived when a child:—

I remember, I remember
The fir trees dark and high;
I used to think their slender tops
Were close against the sky:
It was a childish ignorance,
But now 'tis little joy
To know I'm farther off from heav'n
Than when I was a boy.

A child, looking at very high trees against the blue sky,

* *Paradise Lost*, I, 292-4. † *The Flight of the Dutchess*, 14-20

is apt to think that the trees reach very nearly to the sky—almost touching; for the appearance of the sky above is very real to childish senses. I think you have often heard little children asking whether one could not reach the sky by climbing up a hill or getting on top of a very high roof. The man knows that the sky is only an appearance; but he is not on that account any happier than the child who thinks that God's heaven is very close to him.

From the subject of pine trees we may momentarily turn to that of willow trees. There are many poems about willow trees, and I suppose you remember how frequently the willow, as an emblem of melancholy, is mentioned in the songs and plays of Shakespeare. The melancholy willow is the ghostly willow of Japan,—in England called the “weeping willow.” But all willow trees are not weeping willows: there are many kinds and some of them grow tall and sturdy as any pine. I want to quote to you a very light poem upon the subject: it is an imitation only of Wordsworth; even the title of it is “An Imitation of Wordsworth.” Wordsworth was at one time imitated in a great number of ways—sometimes mockingly, sometimes ironically, sometimes in the way of cruel parody. But this imitation is good poetry, and is worth quoting, at least part of it. It is a parody, if you like, but so gentle a parody that it takes the character of original composition:—

There is a river clear and fair,
 'Tis neither broad nor narrow;
 It winds a little here and there—
 It winds about like any hare;
 And then it takes as straight a course
 As on the turnpike road a horse,
 Or through the air an arrow.

The trees that grow upon the shore,
 Have grown a hundred years or more;
 So long there is no knowing.
 Old Daniel Dobson does not know

When first these trees began to grow ;
And still they grew, and grew, and grew,
As if they'd nothing to do,
 But ever to be growing.

The impulses of air and sky
Have rear'd their stately heads so high,
 And closed their boughs with green ;
Their leaves the dews of evening quaff,—
 And when the wind blows loud and keen,
I've seen the jolly timbers laugh,
 And shakes their sides with merry glee—
 Wagging their heads in mockery.

Fix'd are their feet in solid earth,
 Where winds can never blow ;
But visitings of deeper birth
 Have reach'd their roots below.
For they have gain'd the river's brink,
And of the living water's drink.

There's little Will, a five years child—
 He is my youngest boy ;
To look on eyes so fair and wild,
 It is a very joy :—
He hath conversed with sun and shower,
And dwelt with every idle flower,
 As fresh and gay as them.
He loiters with the briar rose,—
The blue-bells are his play-fellows,
 That dance upon their slender stem.

And I have said, my little Will,
Why should he not continue still
 A thing of Nature's rearing ?
A thing beyond the world's control—
A living vegetable soul,—
 No human sorrow fearing.

It were a blessed sight to see
That child become a Willow-tree,
 His brother trees among.
He'd be four times as tall as me,
 And live three times as long.

This mixture of playfulness and serious suggestion could only have been made by a person who comprehended Wordsworth's method and feeling very well indeed.* It is a little masterpiece of parody; but in spite of the fun there is really a touching suggestion in it: namely, the idea which comes to every parent at times when he thinks about the sorrows of life which his children will have to endure. Also, the composition reminds us of the fact that the comparison between the unconscious life of the tree and the conscious life of man has been made at many times by great religious writers. Just for a moment we have the hint of a sad fancy,—of the question whether the life of the tree is not really a more fortunate condition than the life of a human being. And then this fancy ends with a laugh,—turns off in a burst of merriment. This wrapping about of a serious idea with humour is what makes the quality of “society verse;” and the little parody is an excellent example of society verse in one form.

But now let us look at a more serious poem on the subject of the willow tree. The author is Miss Rossetti; and the quality of the poem is very fine. The whole is a little too long to quote; but we shall read the best of it. The title is “In the Willow Shade.”

I sat beneath a willow tree,
 Where water falls and calls;
 While fancies upon fancies solaced me,
 Some true, and some were false.
 * * *

All things are vain that wax and wane,
 For which we waste our breath;
 Love only doth not wane and is not vain,
 Love only outlives death.

A singing lark rose toward the sky,
 Circling he sang amain;
 He sang, a speck scarce visible sky-high,
 And then he sang again.
 * * *

* *The author is Catherine M. Fanshawe*

A hovering melody of birds
 Haunted the air above;
 They clearly sang contentment without words,
 And youth and joy and love.

O silvery weeping willow tree
 With all leaves shivering,
 Have you no purpose but to shadow me
 Beside this rippled spring?

On this first fleeting day of Spring,
 For Winter is gone by,
 And every bird on every quivering wing
 Floats in a sunny sky.

* * *

Have you no purpose in the world
 But thus to shadow me
 With all your tender drooping twigs unfurled,
 O weeping willow tree?

* * *

The weeping-willow shook its head
 And stretched its shadow long;
 The west grew crimson, the sun smouldered red,
 The birds forbore a song.

Slow wind sighed through the willow leaves,
 The ripple made a moan,
 The world drooped murmuring like a thing that grieves;
 And then I felt alone.

I rose to go, and felt the chill,
 And shivered as I went;
 Yet shivering wondered, and I wonder still,
 What more that willow meant;

That silvery weeping-willow tree
 With all leaves shivering,
 Which spent one long day overshadowing me
 Beside a spring in Spring.

As in Eastern poetry, so in Western poetry also this drooping tree is an emblem of melancholy; and throughout the above-mentioned poem you will observe a certain accord

between the tone of the thoughts uttered and the symbolism itself. The incident is simply this:—a woman, disappointed in love, sits alone under a willow tree, thinking sadly, and asking herself such questions as an unhappy person is likely to ask in moments of doubt and weariness. The world is very beautiful; it is spring; larks are singing; water is laughing; but all this beauty appears to her of no further interest. All she wished for she has lost, and she wonders if existence is worth having, now that she has abandoned that particular hope. And she thinks of the tree above her, whose melancholy drooping almost seems to indicate a sympathy with her sorrow. Yet, no—she thinks, a tree cannot be as we feel;—and yet why is a tree in the world,—for what purpose, only to shadow us?

There is no answer but the sighing of the wind in the branches of the tree. And so the poem abruptly ends. This abrupt ending is really an artistic device. It leaves the imagination unsatisfied, and so leaves the mind also in a melancholy mood. By its suggestion, it provokes an emotion which remains. The same effect is well known to Japanese poets; and the chief interest of this poem ought to lie for you in the resemblance which it offers to certain Japanese methods.

Now before we go to the study of any more long poems I want to quote for you a few short poems about trees. I think you know that the shortest possible form of poetry in English verse is the distich, of two lines only;—the lines may be quite short, or they may be twenty-three or twenty-four syllables in length. But in the next shortest form—the quatrain, there are several poems on trees. These very short poems ought to interest you. Because they come so close to Japanese poetry—not merely in regard to brevity but also in regard to method and feeling. Here are two examples from an American poet,—a very good poet, Aldrich; the first is entitled “Maple Leaves.”

October turned my maple's leaves to gold;
The most are gone now; here and there one lingers:

Soon these will slip from out the twigs' weak hold,
Like coins between a dying miser's fingers.

Perhaps this would seem to you more appropriate of the English than of the American or the Japanese maple: the characteristic crimson colour is not referred to any more than it is by Tennyson, who also speaks of the "gold" of autumn woods. The colour is less deep; in Japan we have the true crimson, also in some parts of Canada and Western America. But in England and in Eastern America the colour of the leaves is rather orange than crimson. However, you must have noticed that gold coin has also a reddish colour: it is not quite yellow, as the pure gold would be. The alloy used gives the reddish tone; and it is in reference to this tone that all English poets used to speak of "red gold." I do not think that the poem itself needs any interpretation, but I think that you will find the simile very picturesque. Twigs of maple may often bear a curious resemblance to withered fingers; and I need not remind you that in Western story and Western art, the money lover, the miser, is always represented as an old man—because avarice is said to be especially a vice of old age,—the age when the fingers become, if you like, dried up like the twigs of a tree in autumn.

The other poem is about pine trees,—the sound of the wind in the pines. It is entitled "Among the Pines."

Faint murmurs from the pine-tops reach my ear,
As if a harp-string—touched in some far sphere—
Vibrating in the lucid atmosphere,
Let the soft south wind waft its music here.

The suggestion is of a sound of heavenly harps,—as the use of the term "far sphere," meaning far-away world, implies. The rest is simple. The beauty of the verse is in the correctness of the description of sound. The sound of wind in the needles of the pines (what we call the leaves in England) very much resembles the deeper tones of a harp. And I think that you would find the suggestion correct,

even if we substitute an Eastern for a Western musical instrument.

The following quatrain, referring to an elm tree, pictures a mood rather than an object: it is not a bit of imagery. It is rather a bit of psychology, and has no title. The poet is an Englishman, William Watson.

To be as this old elm full loth were I,
That shakes in the autumn storm its palsied head.
Hewn by the weird last woodman let me lie
Ere the path rustle with my foliage shed.

“The weird last woodman” is Death. The poet has seen a dead or dying tree, trembling in the cold winds of autumn; and it appears to him an emblem of the misery of old age. Better, he thinks, to die young, than to become old and lose the use of one’s higher faculties. The old age in which the senses are benumbed and intellect wanders is very well compared to a tree so nearly dead that every Spring it can put forth only two or three new leaves.

The willow tree is not the only melancholy tree of Western folklore and folksong. The cypress and the yew are also trees associated in imagination with melancholy things, and chiefly because of their being planted in cemeteries very often. Nobody could write a joyous poem on the subject of that sombre tree, the cypress tree—that is, in English. It is too often to be seen in grave-yards. But in Persian poetry and Arabic poetry the cypress is often mentioned in a very different way—compared with the grace of a young girl, as in the famous line about a cup-bearer in the stanza from Omar Khayyam:—

And lose your fingers in the tresses of
The Cypress-slender Minister of Wine.*

English poets have not yet found any such suggestions in the cypress trees of their country. But the yew tree is not altogether a melancholy tree. It is a very dark tree and a

* *Rubaiyat* (Fourth Edition), XLI

very ornamental tree, and perhaps for both reasons is commonly placed in grave-yards. Some of the most celebrated lines in Tennyson describe the tree leaning above the grave-stones, extending its branches to them like hands, under the ground finding the dead with its roots:

Old Yew, which graspest at the stones
That name the under-lying dead,
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.*

But for other reasons this tree has always interested Englishmen; and it was very extensively planted and cultivated in England during the days of archery. Out of its dense wood the best kind of bows were made; and the trees that furnished English archers with their famous weapon never could be considered an unlucky tree. So, though we find no very remarkable compositions about the cypress, we find a remarkable number of good English verses about the yew tree. Wordsworth wrote several poems about yew trees—elaborate poems; Tennyson had written about yew trees, both in the “*Idylls of the King*” and in “*In Memoriam*,” and in our own time the best of Watson’s poems is a poem upon the yew tree. (Watson is one of the younger poets—one of the very few who have preserved the best traditions of Victorian poetry.) But we cannot quote them all; and I think that the best of poems about yew trees, in a general way, is a poem by Ebenezer Elliot, entitled “*The Maltby Yews*.” I shall quote the whole of this, not because it is the best verse as to mere form (though the form is very good), but chiefly because of the moral thinking with which it ends:—

Famed Maltby yews, with trunks like stone!
Are you or these gray rocks the older?
Like “death-in-life,” ye strangely grow,
And, dead alive, they sternly moulder.

**In Memoriam*, II, 1-4

Memorials grand of death and life,
 That seem from time new life to borrow!
 Full many a race have ye outlived
 Of men whose lives were crime and sorrow.

Age after age, while Time grew old,
 Your writen boughs here slowly lengthened;
 Storm-stricken trees! your stormy strength
 Five hundred years have darkly strengthened.
 Yet safe beneath your mighty roots
 The busy bee hath made its dwelling;
 And, at your feet, the little mouse,
 With lifted hands, its joy is telling.

And high above the full-voiced lark
 The sun, that loves to see you, beneath
 On lonely rock or mossy trunk,
 That with the rock coeval seemeth;
 While, all around, the desert flowers,
 Where breezes drink their freshness, gather,
 As children come to knell and bend
 In prayer around their father's father.

O, could I write upon your gloom
 A solemn verse that would not perish,
 My written thoughts should warn and bless,
 And nations saved the precept cherish;
 For I would bid the dark and strong
 Be greatly good, and daily stronger,
 That power to wrong, and will to wrong,
 Like fiends divorced, might pair no longer.

The appearance of a grand old yew tree is even more impressive than the sight of an English oak tree. The yew is much more fantastic in form, but equally strong and heavy; and the darkness of its leaves gives it a very solemn appearance. The great trunk is just as gray as stone, and really looks like a mass of rock—as the poet has very well suggested in the first of the above stanzas. The play upon words in the third and fourth lines of that first stanza signifies only this:—the growing of the trees is like the grow-

ing of rock—therefore a ghostly thing, because rocks do not grow. It is like death in life; that is to say, dead things becoming alive. On the other hand, the rocks, although supposed to be quite as animate, in the psychological sense, as wood, are not growing but mouldering; and their decay is quite as grimacing to see as the growth of those grim trees. Now the poet thinks of the vast time required for the production of such enormous trees; and he remembers that during that time many generations of men, good and bad, must have passed away. The word “race” in the seventh line of the first stanza must be understood as meaning generation—not race in the ordinary sense of the word.

But while he admires, with awe, the old majesty and strength of these trees, he notices how many little things they shelter and make happy,—flowers, birds, bees, and field-mice. And this suggested to him an abstract image of terrible power exerted only for a good end; and he thinks what a pleasant world this world would indeed become if power were only given to good men. That is the suggestion which the yew tree offers him.

You may observe that the word “dark” is used throughout this poem in a somewhat rare meaning. Of course the foliage of the tree is dark; and the poet correctly describes it. But he is also using the adjective in another meaning,—namely that of the suggestion of darkness, which is fear. In the fifth line of the last stanza, especially, the words “dark and strong” means terrible and strong, terrible in the meaning of having power to make afraid. So the wish of the poet is that those who have the force of will to inspire fear, and the power to make themselves obeyed, should be always good, and therefore the rulers of men. If all goodness were on the side of strength, and all evil on the side of weakness only, then the world would soon become morally perfect.

In speaking of pines, I told you that when English poets describe pines they are rarely speaking of English trees—more usually of Norwegian, Italian, or other European trees.

Pines of the peculiar forms—irregular and fantastic forms—that we see in Japan, do not belong to English landscapes. To my thinking, the most remarkable feature of the Japanese pine is the root. Often stretching to a considerable distance from the tree above the ground, and coiling like a dragon on the face of a cliff, piercing soil and rock, and hanging down like serpents,—these pine roots have a grotesqueness, or rather a suggestion of grotesque life, that must delight the eye of any artist. Shelley has noticed this characteristic in pines, not in England, but in Italy; and he describes the trunks of the trees as “tortured” into strange shapes by the storms that pass over them.* This description, is, however, represented only by a line or two. What most nearly corresponds to the picturesqueness of the pine in England is the picturesqueness of the yew tree. Here is a bit of description from Wordsworth, which will certainly seem to you like a description of certain Japanese groves that you have been in:—

Huge trunks! and each particular trunk a growth
Of intertwined fibres serpentine
Up-coiling, and inveterately convolved;
Nor uninformed with Phantasy, and looks
That threaten the profane; a pillared shade,
Upon whose grassless floor of red-brown hue,
By sheddings from the pining umbrage tinged
Perennially—beneath whose sable roof
Of boughs, as if for festal purpose decked
With unrejoicing berries - ghostly Shapes
May meet at noontide; Fear and trembling Hope,
Silence and Foresight; Death the Skeleton
And Time the Shadow. †

This is from a description of the yew-trees at Lorton Vale. I believe that you will be able to perceive that the

* We paused amid the pines that stood
The giants of waste,
Tortured by storms to shapes as rude
As serpents interlaced. — Shelley: *To Jane*, ll. 21-4
† *Yew-trees*, ll. 16 ff.

style of description is very much in the manner of Milton, and that some lines in it almost seem to have been taken directly from Milton—though such is not the case. The effect is caused by the use of Latin words which were favourites with Milton, and which you will find seldom used by anyone else. But Wordsworth does not use them in quite the same way. The curious adverb “inveterately” in the sense of enduring, you will also have found used by Tennyson; it occurs in the idylls of “Gareth and Lynette,” in the description of the carvings upon the gate of Camelot. “Convolved,” meaning “twisted together” or “intertwisted,” is quite a Miltonian word, and the same thing might be said of “uninformed” in the meaning of “not inspired with,” or “not permeated by.” Among other words,—not particularly quaint, but perhaps unfamiliar, I would call your attention to “sheddings.” We say of a tree, whose leaves are falling, that it sheds its leaves—just as we might say of any insect that it sheds its skin. Only in one case the shedding is a throwing down and in the other case a throwing off. Used as a noun, shedding means a dropping or a thing dropped. The word “unrejoicing” as applied to berries ought to remind you that we use the word “gay” in speaking of colours. A gay colour—literally you would translate, I think, *yukai*, signifying a bright colour, a strong clear colour. “Unrejoicing” might be poetically understood in the reverse sense when we apply it to colour—not gay, therefore gloomy. I think that you have occasionally met with such expressions as “gloomy colour” in English books.

Now for a poem about an oak tree. You know that Tennyson wrote a very famous poem about an oak tree (“The Talking Oak”)—making the tree tell its own story. Most of the English poems about oak trees deal much with the same subject in one or another form: the age of the tree,—the idea of the multitude of things that happened during the long life of the tree. Next to that poem of Tennyson, I think, the best composition on the subject is a poem by Frederick Locker on an historic oak of which the death oc-

curred in his time.

THE OLD OAK-TREE AT HATFIELD BROADOAK

A mighty growth! The countyside
Lamented when the giant died,
For England loves her trees:
What misty legends round him cling!
How lavishly he once did fling
His acorns to the breeze!

To strike a thousand roots in fame,
To give the district half its name,
The fiat could not hinder;
Last spring he put forth one green bough,—
The red leaves hang there still,—but now
His very props are tinder.

Elate, the thunderbolt he braved;
Long centuries his branches waved
A welcome to the blast:
An oak of broadest girth he grew,
And woodman never dared to do
What time has done at last.

From this point the story of the tree is related in a series of beautiful stanzas—a little too long to quote entirely. I shall only cite a few—

And it were hard to fix the tale
Of when he first peered forth a frail
Petitioner for dew;
He took no ill from Saxon spade,
The rabbit spared the tender blade,
And valiantly he grew,

And showed some inches from the ground
When Saint Augustine came and found
Us very proper Vandals;
When nymphs owned bluer eyes than hose,
When England measured men by blows,
And measured time by candles.

That is to say, "It would be very hard to say exactly when this oak tree first began to grow—first showed some tender leaves above the ground. But it must have been long before the time of the Norman Conquest, probably in old Saxon times, the times of King Alfred, or even perhaps before that—in the days when Saxons were still mostly pagans, and when Augustine came to preach Christianity." "Vandals," the name of a fierce Northern tribe, is often used in the sense of barbarians; and that is the meaning here attached to it by the poet. But the handsome young women of those times, though perhaps barbarous, had very blue eyes,—more blue than blue stockings. "Hose" is another word for stockings; and the poet is punning here, for the word "blue-stocking" means an overlearned, pedantic woman. And in those days the value of a man was estimated by his power to strike; and time was measured or estimated not by clocks or watches, but by the burning of candles. You will remember, no doubt, how King Alfred is said to have kept his time by burning candles, which were marked off into portions representing the duration of an hour or thereabouts.

Worn pilgrims blessed his grateful shade
 Ere Richard led the first crusade,
 And maidens led the dance
 Where, boy and man, in summer time,
 Sweet Chaucer pondered o'er his rhyme;
 And Robin Hood, perchance,

Stole hither to Maid Marian
 (And if they did not come, one can
 At any rate suppose it);
 They met beneath the mistletoe,—
 We did the same, and ought to know
 The reason why they chose it.

The reference to Robin Hood and Maid Marian, ought to be familiar to everybody who loves the old English ballads. Marian was the name of the sweetheart of a famous outlaw

and archer; and the poet tells us that they probably met under the oak-tree because the mistletoe grew upon that tree. This is the same thing as saying that they met to kiss each other. You know that the mistletoe is a parasitic plant, very pretty, which grows particularly upon oaks; and in ancient times it was considered a sacred plant by the Druids. In these times it is still used to decorate English homes at the time of Christmas and the New Year. Now at that season, when it is suspended from the ceiling of rooms, there is a game often played by young people—boys and girls, or young men and young women—a kind of forfeit game. If, during the game you can cause a girl, either by forgetfulness, or otherwise, to stand under the mistletoe, you have a right to kiss her.

And this was called the traitors' branch,—
Stern Warwick hung six yeomen stanch
Along its mighty fork;
Uncivil wars for them! The fair
Red rose and white still bloom,—but where
Are Lancaster and York?

I think you remember that in the wars of Lancaster and York—representing in English history very much what is represented in Japanese history by the long struggle between the Taira and Minamoto clans—the emblem of the Lancaster side was a red rose, and that of York a white rose. Looking at the oak tree, the poet remembers one fact of that great contest; namely, that six yeomen, or freeholders, were hung to one of the branches; and he observes that although the white rose and the red rose can still be seen blossoming in the neighbourhood, the dynasties which once chose them for symbols have for ever passed away.

After this we have references to the reigns of King Henry VIII. and of Elizabeth,—of Charles II. and of William,—of the Georges, and at last of the days of Napoleon and Waterloo. The battle of Waterloo was fought, as you know, in the year 1815; and by that time the tree was nearly dead:—

His few remaining boughs were green,
And dappled sunbeams danced between,
Upon the dappled deer,
When, clad in black, a pair were met
To read the Waterloo Gazette,—
They mourned their darling here.

They joined their boy. The tree at last
Lies prone,—discoursing of the past,
Some fancy-dreams awaking.
Resigned, though headlong changes come,
Though nations arm to tuck of drum,
And dynasties are quaking.

The name Waterloo Gazette is, of course, the fancy name of a newspaper; and it suggests to us at once the nature of the news which those two parents, dressed in mourning black, are reading under the tree. Their boy has been killed in the great battle with Napoleon. But remember that the name Waterloo would come in quite correctly here even as the name of a modern English newspaper, for there is now a part of London so named. The expression, "They joined their boy," means they also died. And at last the tree dies utterly and falls, after a life of nearly two thousand years. It had been carefully propped up; but in spite of the props it rotted at last and it fell. Nothing remains of it now but the name of the place, Broadoak,—a very pretty English village. And because of the tree, the memories of it, the poet cries out in conclusion:

Romantic spot! By honest pride
Of old tradition sanctified;
My pensive vigil keeping,
I feel thy beauty like a spell,
And thoughts, and tender thoughts, upwell,
That fill my heart to weeping.

Looking and meditating, the poet says, this place is indeed a place of which its inhabitants may justly be proud, remembering its thousand traditions. And these traditions,

interesting or terrible, are no doubt worthy of all reverential record. But, after everything is said, it is not the tradition of the place that makes the charm, but the beauty of it. When one beholds that beauty, the great green peace of the summer all about, and the silent blossoming of the flowers, the sudden contrast between those memories of blood and this happy quiet brings a shock of emotion. In this way it often happens that our knowledge of history may greatly enhance the emotional charm of a place.

Now for some small bits of poetry about trees,—from Herrick. I lectured before about Herrick;* you know that he was a very curious and happy country clergyman, who wrote hundreds and hundreds of very short poems (as well as longer ones) about every imaginable subject—flowers and girls, earth and skies, lips and wines, love and dancing. If you want a poem on almost any subject, you can find that in Herrick. Some of his work is of course silly; but some is very pretty and famous. Almost every kind of flower known to English gardeners has been sung of by him. This is not a lecture upon the poetry of flowers and plants; there will be no time this term for that subject. But in regard to flowering trees, we may speak to-day and I shall quote a little song about tree blossoms from Herrick, which is almost like a Japanese poem in tone,—though not in form.

TO BLOSSOMS

Fair pledges of a fruitful tree,
 Why do ye fall so fast?
 Your date is not so past
 But you may stay yet here a while
 To blush and gently smile,
 And go at last.

What! were ye born to be
 An hour or half's delight,
 And so to bid good-night?

* *On Poets*, pp. 406-26, *Notes on Herrick*

'Twas pity Nature brought ye forth
Merely to show your worth
And lose you quite.

But you are lovely leaves, where we
May read how soon things have
Their end, though ne'er so brave:
And after they have shown their pride
Like you a while, they glide
Into the grave.

You know that Herrick belongs to the seventeenth century, having been born in the latter part of the sixteenth century, 1591. Compared with the best Japanese poetry even Herrick is quite modern in time;—but is it not curious that these verses of his so much resemble in feeling and thought some of the old Japanese poems? Observe also that these verses are quite as true of Japanese cherry or plum blossoms as of English blossoms. The name of no tree is mentioned, nor is any description given; the poem is only a mirroring of the emotion caught by the sight of falling blossoms. And further, how much simplicity is here, notwithstanding the beauty. There are very few words of two syllables; monosyllables are mostly used; yet the music is perfect. Also the English has scarcely changed in those hundreds of years—so pure is the choice of language. There is only the word “brave” at the end of the third line of the third stanza, which has changed a little. It used to mean what we now express by the adjective “fine,” “handsome” or “showy.” And you can give it the double meaning here, without any harm.

Herrick has poems upon the laurel tree, the cherry tree, and the willow tree,—but none of these are quite so well done as the poem just quoted. In fact the verses on the cherry blossom are rather disappointing for want of another conclusion. However, let us examine the meaning of it. It is numbered 198, in his “Hesperides.”

TO CHERRY-BLOSSOMS

You may simper, blush and smile,
 And perfume the air awhile;
 But, sweet things, ye must be gone,
 Fruit, ye know, is coming on;
 Then, ah! then, where is your grace,
 Whenas cherries come in place?

Perhaps it looks simpler than it is. Herrick is reminded of the grace and beauty of young girls by the sight of the cherry-blossoms—and addresses them as young girls (you know the cherry tree is cultivated only for its fruit in England). And he suggests that as the fruit takes the place of the flower we must not too much regret the flower. The mother may not charm our eyes so much as the young girl does: but she has children,—and these are worth more than the beauty and the grace which may have been lost.

Of the laurel tree he writes only in relation to its mortuary usage. No monument above the dead could be, he cries, half so beautiful or enduring as a laurel tree.

TO LAURELS

A funeral stone,
 Or verse I covet none,
 But only crave
 Of you that I may have
 A sacred laurel springing from my grave:
 Which being seen,
 Blest with perpetual green,
 May grow to be
 Not so much call'd a tree
 As the eternal monument of me.

The perpetual green, you will understand to mean evergreen; evergreen trees being particularly selected to plant above graves. But there is another meaning in this poem. The laurel was especially used by the Greeks and the Romans to furnish those wreaths with which the heroes and poets were crowned; and you know that the term Poet

Laureate hints of this old custom. Herrick is not merely asking for a tree over his grave: he is praying for poetical immortality.

Now I will quote you his little poem about the willow tree, not so much because it is beautiful poetry, but because it contains a great deal of folk-lore, or folk-lore suggestion, in regard to the melancholy signification of the tree:

TO THE WILLOW-TREE

Thou art to all lost love the best,
The only true plant found,
Wherewith young men and maids distress'd,
And left of love, are crown'd.

When once the lover's rose is dead,
Or laid aside forlorn:
Then willow-garlands 'bout the head
Bedew'd with tears are worn.

When with neglect, the lovers' bane,
Poor maids rewarded be,
For their love lost, their only gain
Is but a wreath from thee.

And underneath thy cooling shade,
When weary of the light,
The love-spent youth and love-sick maid
Come to weep out the night.

This little bit of early seventeenth century sentimentality must not be taken too literally. It would not be even natural to suppose that very unhappy persons put willow leaves on their heads, or thought it their duty to sit down and cry under a willow tree. But in the ideas of the time the willow tree was associated with unhappy love; and artists even at a much later day used to represent unhappy lovers crowned with willow leaves. Also in the case of a girl who died of grief at being deserted by her lover, willow leaves were sometimes wreathed about the hair of the corpse. Symbolically the poem has a certain value, as recording

these things,—to which you will find references in Shakespeare also.

A few words about poems on foreign trees. You will find many English poems with reference to palm-trees, which, of course, grow only in the tropics. There is one by Whittier; there are some by various travellers. But none of these rise into the first rank of poetry; and none of them compare with the famous little poem in German by Heine,—which poem I think you know: for it has been translated into almost every language. The substance of it is only this—“Upon a snow-covered mountain in the far North stands a pine-tree all alone; and it dreams of a palm-tree far away, all alone in the burning desert.” That is all the thought in the poem: but it is a thought which has touched tens of thousands of minds,—so well does it suggest the vanity and the sadness of longing. It has also inspired many writers. Perhaps the most noteworthy inspiration derived from it is the poem by Gautier on the obelisks of Paris and of Luxor. The poem is called “Nostalgies d’obélisques,” or “Homesick Longings of Obelisks.” I think you have seen pictures of the Egyptian obelisks, very tall, narrow, pointed stones set upright and covered with inscriptions. The French took away from Egypt one of these and set it up in Paris. The poet represents the other, which had been left in Egypt, longing to be with its brother at Paris, where so many wonderful things are to be seen. But the Paris obelisk is equally homesick in the great cold city, and longs for the bright sun and the snowless winter of Egypt. It is a much finer poem than Heine’s poem; but it was inspired by Heine; and the thought is exactly the same.

About Indian trees we might expect to find many English poems,—so long have the English been writing books about their colonies. But with the exception of a poem by Kingsley, which I quoted in a former lecture,* “The Mango-Tree,” which is really the touching story of an English soldier’s wife,—and a few indifferent poems about the banian-

* His lecture on *Charles Kingsley as Poet* (“On Poetry,” Chapter XXX)

tree—there is very little to be found. A charming Hindoo girl, named Toru Dutt, who at the age of sixteen had so perfectly mastered four European languages that she could write poetry in any one of them—and very good poetry—attempted some English verses about Indian trees: but they are not really so much descriptions of trees as expressions of love for India. Had she lived a few years longer, she would have probably been a great poet; but she died quite young.

In America, of course, there are very strange trees in the regions bordering the tropics; and we might expect American poets to have given them much attention. Unfortunately these States in which the wonderful vegetation exists—such as Florida, Louisiana,—have not produced poets of any mark, and the only reference to the wonders of the southern forests worth mentioning is by Longfellow, who never even saw what he described. But he describes well. As I have seen these forests, and as they are very strange, let me try to tell you something about them. They are what is called swamp forests; and I believe that there is nothing like them in any other part of the world. When you go much farther south into South America, then you will see extraordinary forests indeed; but these are not at all of the same sort. The swamp forests of Florida are not tropical; but they are the weirdest, the most awful-looking places possible to imagine. The principal trees are the cypress and the water-oak; and mixed with these are immense quantities of palmettos—they resemble palms but never grow more than seventy feet high, and they twist their stems in all directions, so that the stems look like great serpents moving. And of course there are dozens of other kinds of trees. But the general appearance of the swamp forest is not made by the shapes of the trees themselves: it is made by an extraordinary moss, called Spanish moss—really an air plant, or parasite which grows upon the branches of the trees and strangles them. It looks exactly like long white hair; and it covers all the branches—sometimes hanging down fifty feet

or more. Thus all the forest looks as if it was covered with long gray hair; and when you first enter such a forest (in a boat) you are almost afraid, everything looks so ghostly and unnatural. Moreover there are queer birds in these forests, which scream at night in the most horrible way. Longfellow has given a little description of a swamp forest by day, but not of the horrible aspect, so much as of the beautiful; for there is beauty even there. This is what he says of a swamp cypress:—

Over their heads the towering and tenebrous boughs
of the cypress
Met in a dusky arch, and trailing mosses in mid-air
Waved like banners that hang on the walls of ancient
cathedrals.
Deathlike the silence seemed, and unbroken, save by
the herons
Home to their roosts in the cedar-trees returning at
sunset,
Or by the owl, as he greeted the moon with demoniac
laughter.
Lovely the moonlight was as it glanced and gleamed
on the water,
Gleamed on the columns of cypress and cedar sustaining
the arches,
Down through whose broken vaults it fell as through
chinks in a ruin.
Dreamlike and indistinct and strange were all things
around them.

This is the scenery upon a river, passing through such a swamp forest. Even in the daytime it is somewhat dark there: the trees meet over the water; and the creeping plants hang down and touch you as you sail by. The reference to the owl is in keeping with facts; a particular kind of owl in those forests utters a cry that is just like a horrible laugh. But the true swamp beyond the river is much more dismal.

Here is a little description by another American poet (who was also famous as a novelist—Simms) of a cypress growth

in the swamp, among alligators and other reptiles. It is called "The Edge of the Swamp."

'Tis a wild spot, and hath a gloomy look;
 The bird sings never merrily in the trees,
 And the young leaves seem blighted. A rank growth
 Spreads poisonously round, with power to taint
 With blistering dew the thoughtless hand that dares
 To penetrate the covert. Cypresses
 Crowd on the dank, wet earth
 Wild rugged trees,
 That look like felon spectres,—fetid shrubs,
 That taint the gloomy atmosphere,—dusk shades,
 That gather, half a cloud, and half a fiend
 In aspect, lurking on the swamp's wild edge,—
 Gloom with their sternness and forbidding frowns
 The general prospect

This is no exaggeration. Even butterflies and singing birds avoid these swamps. The reference to the plant that blisters the hand that touches them is a simple fact; the plant is commonly known as poisonous vine, and it grows thickly among the cypress trees. Perhaps you will think there is some imaginative exaggeration in the comparison of cypress trees to demons and goblins. But really there is no exaggeration whatever. Covered with the long white moss and taking the strangest shapes, these trees very often assume the shapes which artists give to goblins and evil spirits.

While we are speaking of cypress swamps, I ought to quote to you a little ballad,—a ghost story,—by the poet Moore, about the great lake of the dismal swamp in the Southern States of America, on the Borderland between the States of Virginia and North Carolina. This swamp region is thirty miles long and about ten in breadth; and there is a ghost story about it. Moore visited America and was for some time in Virginia where he heard the story. There was a young man engaged to be married to a girl of the town of Norfolk, not far from the swamp forest. She unex-

pectedly died; and he so much regretted her death that he became insane. In his madness he could not be made to believe that the girl was dead: he said that she had only gone to the swamp, and he would go and find her. At a time when his friends were not watching him, he did go to the swamp; and he was never again seen alive. But it was said that his ghost and the ghost of the girl could be seen rowing a boat through the swamp at night. That is the subject of the ballad; and I think you will like it.

“They made her a grave, too cold and damp,
 For a soul so warm and true;
 And she’s gone to the Lake of the Dismal Swamp,
 Where, all night long, by a fire-fly lamp,
 She paddles her white canoe.

“And her fire-fly lamp I soon shall see,
 And her paddle I soon shall hear;
 Long and loving our life shall be,
 And I’ll hide the maid in a cypress tree
 When the footstep of Death is near!”

Away to the Dismal Swamp he speeds —
 His path was rugged and sore,
 Through tangled juniper, beds of reeds,
 Through many a fen where the serpent feeds,
 And man never trod before!

And, when on the earth he sunk to sleep,
 If slumber his eyelids knew,
 He lay, where the deadly vine doth weep
 Its venomous tear and nightly steep
 The flesh with blistering dew!

And near him the she-wolf stirr’d the brake,
 And the copper-snake breathed in his ear,
 Till he starting cried, from his dream awake,
 ‘Oh! when shall I see the dusky Lake,
 And the white canoe of my dear?’”

He saw the Lake, and a meteor bright
 Quick, over its surface play’d —

“Welcome,” he said, “my dear one’s light!”
 And the dim shore echoed, for many a night,
 The name of the death-cold maid!

Till he hollow’d a boat of the birchen bark,
 Which carried him off from shore;
 Far far he follow’d the meteor spark,
 The wind was high and the clouds were dark,
 And the boat return’d no more.

But oft, from the Indian hunter’s camp,
 This lover and maid so true
 Are seen at the hour of midnight damp,
 To cross the Lake by a fire-fly lamp,
 And paddle their white canoe!

This does not need any explanation, I think; it is not perhaps exactly great poetry; but it is pretty and the work of the greatest of English song-writers;—and it is one of the few things in the way of a song, written by an Englishman, which can be translated successfully into any language without losing its charm.

I told you that except Kingsley’s poem on the mangrove few English poems on foreign trees rise into the first class; and the same may be said of American poems on exotic growth. But I shall quote to you Whittier’s poem on the palm—at least a part of it; for, with the expansion of the Japanese Empire southward, the true palm has become a Japanese tree, and you may feel more interested in it. The subject of the poem is the utility of the tree. Next to the bamboo, no other tree is so useful to mankind.

THE PALM-TREE

Is it the palm, the cocoa-palm,
 On the Indian Sea, by the isles of balm?
 Or is it a ship in the breezeless calm?

A ship whose keel is of palm beneath,
 Whose ribs of palm have a palm-bark sheath,
 And a rudder of palm it steereth with.

Branches of palm are its spars and rails,
 Fibres of palm are its woven sails,
 And the rope is of palm that idly trails!

Why does the good ship bearso well?
 The cocoa-nut with its stony shell,
 And the milky saw of its inner cell.

What are its jars, so smooth and fine,
 But hollowed nuts, filled with oil and wine,
 And the cabbage that ripens under the Line?

You must understand that all the productions here described are products of different kinds of palm trees. The oil spoken of is palm-oil, a great article of commerce; the wine is palm-wine, obtained by fermenting the juice of a particular tree; and the "cabbage" is the head and heart of the magnificent tree called the cabbage palm which grows often to the height of two hundred feet. And now let us hear about the captain:

In the cabin he sits on a palm-mat soft,
 From a beaker of palm his drink is quaffed,
 And a palm-thatch shields from the sun aloft!

His dress is woven of palmy strands,
 And he holds a palm-leaf scroll in his hands,
 Traced with the Prophet's wise commands!

The turban folded about his head
 Was daintily wrought of the palm-leaf braid,
 And the fan that cools him of palm was made.

Of threads of palm was the carpet spun
 Whereon he kneels when the day is done,
 And the foreheads of Islam are bowed as one!

To him the palm is a gift divine,
 Wherein all uses of man combine,—
 House, and raiment, and food, and wine!

And, in the hour of his great release,
 His need of the palm shall only cease
 With the shroud wherein he lieth in peace.*

The regions described here is the whole of that part of the East about the Malay Peninsula and southward, and eastward through the islands where the Mohammedan religion chiefly prevails. In those richly fertile countries various kinds of palm are put to all the uses described. I think you have heard of Sanscrit books, or perhaps Pali books, written upon palm leaves; and in the Malay Peninsula and in Siam and Burmah palm leaves have long been used for manuscripts. The reference to the carpet you must understand as being a reference to the "praying-carpets"—not an ordinary carpet. Every good Mohammedan carries about with him when he travels a little square of carpet to kneel upon while making his prayer—which must be done three times every day. The evening prayer is the particular prayer here meant by Whittier; and the line, "when the foreheads of Islam are bowed as one," means when all the people in the Mohammedan world bend their heads in prayer and turn their faces toward the holy city of Mecca.

Although English poetry on the subject of trees is less rich and varied than you might expect, the same might be said, I imagine, of most European poetry within the same limits. For, remember, we have been considering poems only about great trees—not about shrubs and plants and flowers. If we went back to old Greek times we should find a great deal of poetry and legend on the subject of the first creation of trees—you know that in Greek mythology almost every tree and flower was supposed to have been, at some time or other, a man or woman, a boy or girl, changed by the gods in consequence of either pity or anger. A great number of such stories you can find for yourselves, if you wish, in

* The following stanza completes the poem:—

"Allah il Allah!" he sings his psalm,
 On the Indian Sea, by the isles of balm;
 "Thanks to Allah who gives the palm!"

Ovid's "Metamorphoses." But the stories would not come within the subject of this lecture. Neither would the beautiful Greek story about the Tree Spirit—which you will find put into beautiful English verse by Landor. We are speaking of English poetry on trees—not of classic poetry, or Romance poetry. As I said before, I doubt whether any modern European poetry is very rich on this topic. But, before concluding this lecture I must remind you that the greatest of all poetical ideas about trees was that of the old Northern religion—the old Scandinavian mythology: the tradition of the great Ash-Tree Yggdrasill. This mighty tree, whose roots grew in Night and Death and whose branches reached far beyond Heaven,—supporting both the world of men and the paradise of the gods upon its branches—has now become for us the grand symbol of the Universal Life. This is one instance of a religious myth obtaining Immortality through transformation into world-poetry. We know now very much more than the old Norsemen knew about the Universe; but we do not feel in the least inclined to smile at their old imagination that the world was supported by an Ash-Tree. Not at all. Primitive though the fancy was, it was one of the grandest fancies in any religion; and, like all great religious myths, it contained the suggestion of a grand truth.