Sir Lancelot, a legend of the Middle Ages

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SIR LANCELOT:

A LEGEND

OF THE MIDDLE AGES.

BY

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PREFACE.

It is now fifteen years since this poem was composed. Long before my publisher called this autumn for a second edition, I had twice carefully revised it; and on occasion of the second revision had made considerable changes. Many hundreds of verses have been omitted, a portion of the poem, which was not in its natural place before, has now been published in another volume, some hundreds of new verses have been added, a great number of alterations, chiefly of a metrical character, have been made all over the poem, and one book of it may almost be said to have been reconstructed. These changes, it is hoped, will make it somewhat more worthy of that public favour, which it has already received. The work is now more like what it was in its original conception.

The object of the poem is not an ambitious one. It has always seemed to me, that a love of natural objects, and the depth, as well as exuberance and refinement of mind, produced by an intelligent delight in scenery, are elements of the first importance in the education of the young. But, a taste for the beauties of nature being a quicker growth
than the power or habit of independent thought, it is apt in youth to wander from the right path, and lose itself in some of the devious wilds of pantheism. What I wished to effect in this poem was, to show how an enthusiastic and most minute appreciation of the beauties of nature might unite itself with Christian sentiments, Christian ritual, and the strictest expression of Christian doctrine.

Various circumstances, upon which it is needless to enter, but which have an interest to myself, led me to fix the supposed action of my poem in the reign of Henry the Third. My perfect acquaintance with all the nooks and angles of the Westmoreland Mountains, the scene of my first and very free school-days, and my familiarity with their changeful features, their biographies of light and shade, by night as well as by day, through all the four seasons, naturally decided me as to the locality of my poem. Moreover the choice of that particular epoch enabled me to make nature symbolize ritual and doctrine in a manner which was in keeping with the spirit of those ages, but which would have seemed forced and unreal if my hero had been a man of modern times, who must either have been unlikely to allegorize nature at all, or must have done so through the insight of a modern education. In this case the poem must on the one hand have been overloaded with allusions to physical science, or on the other have
failed to persuade, from the apparent ignorance which the omission of such allusions would imply.

The same choice also permitted me to restore the physical features of the country to the state in which my boyhood always persisted in representing them to me, during the many solitary afternoons, and long summer holy-days spent among the ruined halls and castles and moated houses, which are so frequent on the eastern side of those mountains, the abbeys shrinking rather to the west. The forests were replanted; the chases were filled again with deer, the ancestors of the red deer of the Duke of Norfolk which still drank at the brink of Ullswater by Lyulph’s Tower; the heronries slanted again over the edges of the lakes; the unpersecuted eagles woke the echoes of Helvellyn; spear-tops glanced in the sun on the steep paths that lay like pale green threads across the mountains; the castles rang with arms; the bright ivy had not mantled the ruddy sand-stone beacons which warned men of the Scotch; the abbeys and chantries were haunted by church-music, while the lesser cells in the secluded pastoral vales heard once more the nightly aspirations of wakeful prayer, and Cistercian shepherds could scarcely be distinguished, in their white habits, from the sheep they tended, as they moved across the fells high up above their moorland granges.
As the warden on the battlements, or rather as the alchemist from his turret, saw that land of hills and woods and waters beneath the starlight long ago, so did I see it always in those ardent years. From earliest times it was to me the land of knightly days, and the spell has never yet been broken. When it became the dwelling-place of manhood and the scene of earnest labour, the light upon it only grew more golden; and now, a year-long prisoner in the great capital, that region seems to me a home whence I have been exiled, but which, only to think of, is tranquillity and joy.

Frederick Faber.

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DEDICATION.

Dear Brother! while the murmurs of my song
In resfluent waves were dying on my ear,
The spoken music blending with the thrills
Of that unuttered sweetness, which remains
A cherished refuse in the poet's soul,
Still to distinguish him from all the hearts
To which, by love constrained, he hath resigned
So much of his interior self,—and while
I listened, like a practised mountaineer,
To my own voice rebounding from the heights
Of song, redoubled and prolonged returns
Of pleasant echoes,—from the far-off South
Came welcome news of thee, my dearest Friend!

Thou spakest in thine own most beautiful way,
And in the sunny visionary style
Of thy strange solemn language, of the lights
In those new skies, the Cross with starry arms,
Palpably bending at the dead of night,
The star-built Altar, Noe's sheeny Dove
Still winging her incessant flight on high,
The definite Triangle, and other such,
Girt with huge spaces of unstarry blue,
As sacred precincts round about them spread,
Through which the eye, from all obstruction clear,
Travels the heavens at midnight, and salutes
Those orbèd constellations hung thereon
Like festal lamps on some cathedral wall;—
Emblems of Christian things, not pagan names
That nightly desecrate our northern skies.
Thus with thy spirit softly overshadowed
By the most brilliant umbrage of those stars,
Thou spakest of the snowy albatross,
Sailing in circuits round thy lonely bark,
Fondling its foamy prow as if it deemed,
And not unjustly, its companionship
A solace to thee on the desert waves;
And underneath the great Australian trees
A light was in strange creatures' wondering eyes,—
How solemnly interpreted by thee!
O it was all so beautiful, so strange,
And with its current intercepted oft
With place for some endearment of old love,
I thought in thy wild strain how passing sweet
The poetry of those far southern seas!

Few days elapsed: there came another strain,
Fresh poetry from those far southern seas!
It sang of sickness and the fear of death,
Of suffering gently borne for love of Christ,
Who calls us to His service as He wills,
Not as we choose; and, mingling with the strain,
Broke forth thy simple and courageous words
And peaceful trust, as happy and as bold
As a child's prayer. And wilt thou think it wrong,
That, when I prayed and wept and deeply mourned,
There was a pleasure in my mourning, such
As I have never felt in love before?
For who that doth remember thee, how pale!
How gentle! but would smile for very faith,
As Abraham smiled, at thine heroic words,
Which maste thine outward aspect so unfitly?
Ah! that was poetry tenfold more sweet
DEDICATION.

Than when thou sangst of stars, and ocean birds,
And wandering creatures underneath the trees!
O more than Brother! my impetuous heart,
Nurtured too much on volatile impulses,
In loving thee hath learned still more to love,
And study, with a covetous design,
The science of thy quiet nature, calm,
Profoundly calm amid all cares and doubts,
As though thy faculties had never had,
Or left and lost in thy baptismal font,
All power of self-disturbance, so serene
The unsuspicious greatness of thy virtue,
Thy simple-tongued humility, and love
Too self-forgetful to have much of fear!
Like one who sits upon a windy steep,
And looks into a placid lake below
Bright in the breezeless vale, so have I gazed
With long affection fathomed to its depths,
Into the inspired tranquillity of heart
On thy scarce ruffled innocence bestowed.
Dear Friend! I speak bold words of praise, and tears
Warrant my boldness, for I know full well
Thine eye will never see what would have pained
Thy lowliness: that supernatural calm
Of thy pure nature will be deeper still,
Unutterably deepened, ere my words,
Not written as to one alive, shall reach
The island of thy gradual martyrdom.
O no! thou wilt be once more at my side,
A help to my weak purposes, an arm
Invisible, in intercession strong,
No part of this half dead, half dying world,
But to the region of the living gone
To pray for us, and to be reached by prayer.
When these poor lines have travelled to that shore,
Distance and exile will have fallen from thee,
Sun-withered wreaths, before the eye of death;
Thou wilt be in my neighbourhood again,
Again come home unto my soul's embrace,
No more the frail and wasting Missionary,
But the high Mate of Angels and of Saints!
Then let this song be dedicate to thee!
If life be thine, forgive these words of praise,—
Thou knowest they are my friendship's first offence.
Should not this song be thine, all mountain-born?
Are not its verses laden with sweet names,
Which to our hearts are poems in themselves?
And unnamed landscapes are there, singular trees,
Spots of remembered sunshine or soft shade,
And unforgotten fabrics in the clouds,
Farms on the heath, and fields beside the town,
Haunts by the mere, choice gardens of the poor
Oft chance-discovered, O how much beloved
And prized by us, as luxuries that belonged
To over-tasked yet cheerful cottagers
Whose servants we, as priests, would fain become!
Such things are ever floating on my song,
Sequestered places, household scenes, inviting
Through language more descriptive than their names
A pleased detection from thy mindful heart.
Did we not learn our poetry together,
And sing those spousal verses to each other,
Among the glories hills whose kindling heights
Gleam like familiar beacons on its course?
Was there, except thy modesty, and growth
In meek self-sacrifice for Holy Church,
Was there one difference 'twixt our blended souls?