

FRESH FIELDS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649588718

Fresh Fields by John Burroughs

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JOHN BURROUGHS

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THE HOME OF A SPIDER



FRESH FIELDS

BY

JOHN BURROUGHS



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
The Riverside Press, Cambridge
1902

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W. L. G.
London 1850
5-11-39

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M.P. 5-11-39

B. 14. S.

FRESH FIELDS

I

NATURE IN ENGLAND

I

THE first whiff we got of transatlantic nature was the peaty breath of the peasant chimneys of Ireland while we were yet many miles at sea. What a homelike, fireside smell it was! it seemed to make something long forgotten stir within one. One recognizes it as a characteristic Old World odor, it savors so of the soil and of a ripe and mellow antiquity. I know no other fuel that yields so agreeable a perfume as peat. Unless the Irishman in one has dwindled to a very small fraction, he will be pretty sure to dilate his nostrils and feel some dim awakening of memory on catching the scent of this ancestral fuel. The fat, unctuous peat, — the pith and marrow of ages of vegetable growth, — how typical it is of much that lies there before us in the elder world; of the slow ripenings and accumulations, of extinct life and forms, decayed civilizations, of ten thousand growths and achieve-

ments of the hand and soul of man, now reduced to their last modicum of fertilizing mould!

With the breath of the chimney there came presently the chimney swallow, and dropped much fatigued upon the deck of the steamer. It was a still more welcome and suggestive token, — the bird of Virgil and of Theocritus, acquainted with every cottage roof and chimney in Europe, and with the ruined abbeys and castle walls. Except its lighter-colored breast, it seemed identical with our barn swallow; its little black cap appeared pulled down over its eyes in the same manner, and its glossy steel-blue coat, its forked tail, its infantile feet, and its cheerful twitter were the same. But its habits are different; for in Europe this swallow builds in chimneys, and the bird that answers to our chimney swallow, or swift, builds in crevices in barns and houses.

We did not suspect we had taken aboard our pilot in the little swallow, yet so it proved: this light navigator always hails from the port of bright, warm skies; and the next morning we found ourselves sailing between shores basking in full summer sunshine. Those who, after ten days of sorrowing and fasting in the desert of the ocean, have sailed up the Frith of Clyde, and thence up the Clyde to Glasgow, on the morning of a perfect mid-May day, the sky all sunshine, the earth all verdure, know what this experience is; and only those can know it. It takes a good many foul days in Scotland to breed one fair one; but when the fair