

**SONGS OF THE FIELDS;
WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY LORD DUNSANY**

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Songs of the Fields; With an Introduction by Lord Dunsany by Francis Ledwidge

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INTRODUCTION

By LORD DUNSANY

IF one who looked from a tower for a new star, watching for years the same part of the sky, suddenly saw it (quite by chance while thinking of other things), and knew it for the star for which he had hoped, how many millions of men would never care?

And the star might blaze over deserts and forests and seas, cheering lost wanderers in desolate lands, or guiding dangerous quests; millions would never know it.

And a poet is no more than a star.

If one has arisen where I have so long looked for one, amongst the Irish peasants, it can be little more than a secret that I shall share with those who read this book because they care for poetry.

I have looked for a poet amongst the Irish peasants because it seemed to me that almost only amongst them there was in daily use a

diction worthy of poetry, as well as an imagination capable of dealing with the great and simple things that are a poet's wares. Their thoughts are in the spring-time, and all their metaphors fresh: in London no one makes metaphors any more, but daily speech is strewn thickly with dead ones that their users should write upon paper and give to their gardeners to burn.

In this same London, two years ago, where I was wasting June, I received a letter one day from Mr. Ledwidge and a very old copy-book. The letter asked whether there was any good in the verses that filled the copy-book, the produce apparently of four or five years. It began with a play in verse that no manager would dream of, there were mistakes in grammar, in spelling of course, and worse—there were such phrases as "thwart the rolling foam," "waiting for my true love on the lea," etc., which are vulgarly considered to be the appurtenances of poetry: but out of these and many similar errors there arose continually, like a mountain sheer out of marshes, that easy fluency of shapely lines which is now so noticeable in all that he writes; that and sudden glimpses of the fields that he seems at times to bring so near to one that one exclaims,

"Why, that is how Meath looks," or "It is just like that along the Boyne in April," quite taken by surprise by familiar things: for none of us knows, till the poets point them out, how many beautiful things are close about us.

Of pure poetry there are two kinds, that which mirrors the beauty of the world in which our bodies are, and that which builds the more mysterious kingdoms where geography ends and fairyland begins, with gods and heroes at war, and the sirens singing still, and Alpb going down to the darkness from Xanadu. Mr. Ledwidge gives us the first kind. When they have read through the profounder poets, and seen the problem plays, and studied all the perplexities that puzzle man in the cities, the small circle of readers that I predict for him will turn to Ledwidge as to a mirror reflecting beautiful fields, as to a very still lake rather on a very cloudless evening.

There is scarcely a smile of Spring or a sigh of Autumn that is not reflected here, scarcely a phase of the large benedictions of Summer; even of Winter he gives us clear glimpses sometimes, albeit mournfully, remembering Spring.

^a In the red west the twisted moon is low,
And on the bubbles there are half-lit stars:

Music and twilight : and the deep blue flow
Of water : and the watching fire of Mars.
The deep fish slipping through the moonlit bars
Make death a thing of sweet dreams,—²

What a Summer's evening is here.

And this is a Summer's night in a much longer poem that I have not included in this selection, a summer's night seen by two lovers :

"The large moon rose up queenly as a flower
Charmed by some Indian pipes. A hare went by,
A snipe above them circled in the sky."

And elsewhere he writes, giving us the mood and picture of Autumn in a single line :

"And somewhere all the wandering birds have flown."

With such simple scenes as this the book is full, giving nothing at all to those that look for a "message," but bringing a feeling of quiet from gleaming Irish evenings, a book to read between the Strand and Piccadilly Circus amidst the thunder and hootings.

To every poet is given the revelation of some living thing so intimate that he speaks, when he speaks of it, as an ambassador speaking for his sovereign ; with Homer it was the heroes, with Ledwidge it is the small birds that sing, but in particular especially the blackbird, whose cause he champions against all other

birds almost with a vehemence such as that with which men discuss whether Mr. —, M.P., or his friend the Right Honourable — is really the greater ruffian. This is how he speaks of the blackbird in one of his earliest poems; he was sixteen when he wrote it, in a grocer's shop in Dublin, dreaming of Slane, where he was born; and his dreams turned out to be too strong for the grocery business, for he walked home one night, a distance of thirty miles:

" Above me smokes the little town
With its whitewashed walls and roofs of brown
And its octagon spire toned smoothly down
As the holy minds within.
And wondrous, impudently sweet,
Half of him passion, half conceit,
The blackbird calls adown the street,
Like the piper of Hamelin."

Let us not call him the Burns of Ireland, you who may like this book, nor even the Irish John Clare, though he is more like him, for poets are all incomparable (it is only the versifiers that resemble the great ones), but let us know him by his own individual song: he is the poet of the blackbird.

I hope that not too many will be attracted to this book on account of the author being a peasant, lest he come to be praised by the how-

interesting ! school ; for know that neither in any class, nor in any country, nor in any age, shall you predict the footfall of Pegasus, who touches the earth where he pleaseth and is bridled by whom he will.

DUNSANY.

June, 1914.

I WROTE this preface in such a different June, that if I sent it out with no addition it would make the book appear to have dropped a long while since out of another world, a world that none of us remembers now, in which there used to be leisure.

Ledwidge came last October into the 5th Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, which is in one of the divisions of Kitchener's first army, and soon earned a lance-corporal's stripe.

All his future books lie on the knees of the gods. May They not be the only readers.

Any well-informed spy can probably tell you our movements, so of such things I say nothing.

DUNSANY, *Captain,*

5th R. Inniskilling Fusiliers.

June, 1915.