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wild life, environment

THE NATURALIST



I was six years old that May morning. I played with my dolls on the porch of our New York farmhouse, and watched a robin carry mud to her nest in the maple and a pair of bluebirds flit among orchard blossoms alive with humming bees. In a sunny corner my kitten lay asleep.

A crunch of gravel sounded and a tall man walked briskly up our drive, a broad-brimmed hat on his head and a frayed knapsack on his back. *He* was here.

This man had forgone the conventions of family and business. An eccentric naturalist and bird artist, he traveled on foot or rode

the rails wherever fresh vistas beckoned. His comings were unexpected and his departures were abrupt. My mother said he was unbalanced. Yet he seemed to have some mysterious hold over her, for she let me accompany him into the woods where he shared with me his knowledge of wildlife and plants.

Now, as he strode with Indian swiftness along our driveway, I shrank into a dark corner. Each time he came he was a stranger and I was afraid.

His fist hammered on the back door. My mother's voice answered. Perhaps she would send him away, saving me the ecstasy and heartache of his presence. I waited in anticipation and dread. Soon his footfalls came again and he crossed the grass to the porch. His face was lean and dark; under his shabby hat his eyes glowed with excitement. When he saw me he leaped up the steps, threw out his arms and said, "Hello! Aren't you glad to see me?"

I hid my face in my hands.

He sat on the top step and began to speak. Before long I dared to look up; next I ran to get my kitten; then I took him to the orchard to see the bluebirds. Later I let him take my hand and lead me toward the woods. At the kitchen window I saw my mother peering past the curtain. Already she was part of another world.

Down the lane I skipped beside him. He told me that the stepplebush was named "hardhack" because of its tough stems. A bobolink called in the meadow. "They nest deep in tall grass," he said. "He's singing to his mate." He recited a verse of "Robert of Lincoln," and his "spink, spank, spink" rang in the cadence of the bobolink's song.

In the woods, we moved under new-leaved trees. Beside a log he displayed clumps of red wake-robin, and green May apples with umbrella-like leaves. "Listen," he said, and identified the trill of a migrating warbler overhead. "Look." He stooped to pick up a wood frog just awake from winter's sleep. He put the smooth brown frog into my hand so that I could feel the surge of the frog's leap to freedom.

We explored the woods together until noon. "Time for dinner," he said. But I wanted to stay. "Your mother'll worry. We mustn't let that happen." He promised to come back in the evening for another adventure.

At the dinner table I jabbered to my mother of what we had seen. She seemed absent as I described the birds and flowers. Before I had finished eating she rose and began to do the dishes.

After supper I sat in the swing to watch the sun go down. Just as it left the treetops he stepped into the yard. We walked down a trail that led through dense cedars to a clearing next to the creek. The naturalist now assumed the role of magician. "We will see the woodcock and hear him sing," he whispered. No sooner had he said the words than a harsh "Peent!" sounded from among brush beside the water. It was repeated at intervals, each time preceded by a gurgle like liquid running out of a bottle.

I could not see the long-beaked bird until he flew. With rapid wingbeats he circled the clearing, rising higher and higher until he was almost lost to sight. There he threw himself back and forth across the sky, twittering madly. He spiraled down still singing; then he plummeted to earth. He did this again and again.

We stayed until the sky became too dark to see. Overcome with weariness, I let strong arms lift me and carry me home. At the door my friend said goodnight with the promise that next morning he would draw me animal sketches.

The following day I watched his pencil create one picture after another. With a few lines he caught the essence of a running horse or a darting swallow; the grace of my kitten lazing in the sun. He told stories and answered questions.

In less than a week he was gone.

From clippings and pictures I was aware that he was a well-known artist who wrote books and articles about nature. It was my dream to draw as he did. I felt as he did about the wonders of nature, which my mother seemed to ignore.

I was nine when at Christmas a gift came from the West where he lived. It was a copy of "My Rosary," by Robert Cameron Rogers, hand-lettered and illustrated with watercolors. One scene was of a young girl laughing under an apple tree, her hands full of bloom.

The other, a tall man silhouetted at sunset against western hills.

*"The hours I spent with thee, dear heart,
Are as a string of pearls to me;
I count them over, every one apart,
My rosary, my rosary . . .*

*"Oh memories that bless — and burn!
Oh barren gain — and bitter loss!
I kiss each bead and
Strive at last to learn
To kiss the cross, Sweetheart,
To kiss the cross."*

Dimly, I felt what the cross was, and in my throat came a small lump. Yet I drew back, for he was a stranger. His message was alien to me.

As the years went by the naturalist's skill and fame as an artist increased. He strove for integrity in his paintings — not only exact measurements and true colors, but portrayal of personality: "You haven't drawn *Turdus migratorius* until you've got 'that robin look,'" he instructed, as he freely criticized my drawings.

Years passed. My early love for nature had deepened and my husband and I had bought land for a wildlife refuge in New Jersey. Belatedly, I became an artist and writer, with the old naturalist's work like a hand leading me on.

When word came that he lay dying, I wanted to fly to his bedside. The trip West was impossible, but miles were no barrier. Our walks in the woods long ago had become a crusade to save nature's beauty, and we were together as never before.

In his ninety-first year my father, Edmund J. Sawyer, died. Dean of American bird artists, he had instilled in me an undying respect for nature, and a passion to preserve it alive. Accepting the cross, I vowed to carry on. ■ ■

NOTE: *Have you been doing some thinking lately? If it is about animals, what you've seen that disturbs or delights you, write a letter to this column. Here's a chance to express your deepest feelings, your most profound thoughts. If you are 12-18 years of age, we would like to hear what you think about animals. We may publish what you say (unless you specifically request that we do not). Sorry, but we cannot answer each letter personally.*

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