GENE STRATTON-PORTER

MUSIC OF THE WILD

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PART I The Chorus of the Forest

SINCE the beginning the forest has been singing its song, but few there are who have eared to learn either the words or the melody. Its chorus differs from that of any other part of the music of nature, and the price that must be paid to learn it is higher. The forest is of such gloomy and forbidding aspect that intimate acquaintance is required in order to learn to love it truly. So only a few peculiar souls, caring for solitude and far places, and oblivious to bodily discomfort, have answered this wildest of calls, and gone to the great song carnival among the trees.

The forest always has been compared rightly with a place of worship. Its mighty trees, sometimes appearing as if set in aisles, resemble large pillars, and the canopy formed by their overarching branches provides the subdued light conducive to worship. The dank, pungent air arises as incense around you. Sunlight, streaming in white shafts through small interstices, suggests candles. Altars are everywhere, carpeted with velvet mosses, embroidered with lichens, and decorated with pale-faced flowers, the eternal symbol of purity and holiness. Its winds forced among overlapping branches sing softly as harps, roar and wail as great organs, and scream and sob as psalters and hautboys. Its insect, bird, and animal life has been cradled to this strange music until voices partake of its tones, so that they harmonize with their tree accompaniment, and all unite in one mighty volume, to create the chorus of the forest.

I doubt if any one can enter a temple of worship and not be touched with its import. Neither can one go to primal forests and not feel closer the spirit and essence of the

Almighty than anywhere else in nature. In fact, God is in every form of creation; but in the fields and marshes the work of man so has effaced original conditions that he seems to dominate. The forest alone raises a chorus of praise under natural conditions. Here you can meet the Creator face to face, if anywhere on earth. Yet very few come to make His acquaintance.

The reason lies in the discomfort: the gloomy, forbidding surroundings. It may be that there yet lingers in the hearts of us a touch of that fear inherited from days when most of the beasts and many of the birds were larger and of greater strength than man, so that existence was a daily battle. Then the forest is ever receding. As we approach, it retreats, until of late years it has become difficult to find, and soon it is threatened with extinction. As yet, it is somewhere, but patience and travel are required to reach it. I found the forest here pictured after a journey by rail, water, and a long road so narrow that it seemed as if every one traveling it went in the morning and returned at night, but none ever passed on the way.

Such a narrow little road, and so sandy that it appeared like a white ribbon stretched up gentle hill and down valley! On each side I saw evidence that lately it had been forest itself; else the way would not have been so very narrow, the sides impassable, and bordered with trees so mighty and closely set as to dwarf it to the vanishing point long within the range of vision. The very flowers were unusual, the faint musky perfume creeping out to us, a touch of the forest greeting our approach. The road ran long and straight, and where it ended the work of man ceased and the work of nature began.

The forest was surrounded by a garden, where sunlight and warmth encouraged a growth not to be found inside. Here in early spring daintiest flowers had flourished: anemones and violets. Bloodroot had lifted bloom waxen-pure and white, and its exquisitely cut and veined slivery,

blue-green leaves, set on pink coral stems, were yet thrifty. Now there were flowers, fruits, berries, and nuts in a profusion the fields never know, and with few except the insects, birds, butterflies, and squirrels to feast upon them. You could produce a rain of luscious big blackberries by shaking a branch.

There were traces of a straggling snake-fence in one place, on top of which the squirrels romped and played. This could not have extended far, because the impenetrable swamp that soon met the forest stretched from sight.

Then the Almighty made the work of man unnecessary by inclosing the forest in a fence of His design, vastly to my liking. First was found a tangle of shrubs that wanted their feet in the damp earth and their heads in the light. Beneath them I stopped to picture tall, blue bellflower, late bluebells, and spiderwort, with its peculiar leafage and bloom. There was the flame of foxfire, the lavender and purple of Joe-Pye weed, ironwort, and asters just beginning to show color, for it was middle August, and late summer bloom met early fall. There were masses of yellow made up of goldenrod beginning to open, marigold, yellow daisies, and cone-flowers.

But the real fence inclosing the forest was a hedge of dogwood, spice-brush, haw, hazel, scrub oak, maple, and elm bushes. At bloom time it must have been outlined in snowy flowers; now nuts and berries were growing, and all were interlaced and made impenetrable by woodbine, wild grape, clematis, and other stoutly growing vines.

At first we could not see the gateway, but after a little searching it was discovered. Once found, it lay clear and open to all. The posts were slender, mast-like trunks shooting skyward; outside deep golden sunshine you almost thought you could handle as fabric, inside merely a few steps to forest darkness. Near the gateway a tiny tree was waging its battle to reach the sky, and a little farther a dead one was compelled to decay leaning against its fellows, for

they were so numerous it could not find space to lie down and rest in peace. This explained at once that there would be no logs. All the trees would lodge in falling, and decay in that position, and their bark and fiber would help to make uncertain walking.

At the gate is the place to pause and consider. The forest issues an universal invitation, but few there be who are happy in accepting its hospitality. If you carry a timid heart take it to the fields, where you can see your path before you and familiar sounds fall on your ears. If you carry a sad heart the forest is not for you. Nature places gloom in its depths, sobs among its branches, cries from its inhabitants. If your heart is blackened with ugly secrets, better bleach them in the healing sunshine of the fields. The soul with a secret is always afraid, and fear was born and has established its hiding place in the forest. You must ignore much personal discomfort and be sure you are free from sadness and fear before you can be at home in the forest.

But to all brave, happy hearts I should say, "Go and learn the mighty chorus." Somewhere in the depths of the forest you will meet the Creator. The place is the culmination of His plan for men adown the ages, a material thing proving how His work evolves, His real gift to us remaining in natural form. The fields epitomize man. They lay as he made them. They are artificial. They came into existence through the destruction of the forest and the change of natural conditions. They prove how man utilized the gift God gave to him. But in the forest the Almighty is yet housed in His handiwork and lives in His creation.

Therefore step out boldly. You are with the Infinite. Earth that bears trees from ten to fourteen feet in circumference, from forty to sixty to the branching, and set almost touching each other, will not allow you to sink far. You are in little danger of meeting anything that is not more frightened at your intrusion than you are at it.

Cutting your path before you means clearing it of living things as well as removing the thicket of undergrowth. A hundred little creatures are fleeing at your every step, and wherever you set foot you kill without your knowledge; for earth, leaves, and mosses are teeming with life. You need only press your ear to the ground and lie still to learn that a volume of sound is rising to heaven from the creeping, crawling, voiceless creatures of earth, the minor tone of all its music.

The only way to love the forest is to live in it until you have learned its pathless travelled, growth, and inhabitants as you know the fields. You must begin at the gate and find your road slowly, else you will not hear the Great Secret and see the Compelling Vision. There are trees you never before have seen; flowers and vines the botanists fail to mention; such music as your ears can not hear elsewhere, and never-ending pictures no artist can reproduce with pencil or brush.

This forest in the summer of 1907 was a complete jungle. The extremely late spring had delayed all vegetation, and then the prolonged and frequent rains fell during summer heat, forcing everything to unnatural size. Jewel-weed that we were accustomed to see attain a height of two feet along the open road, raised there that season to four, and in the shade of the forest overgrew a tall man; its pale yellow-green stems were like bushes, and its creamy cornucopias dangled the size of foxglove, freckled with much paler brown than in strong light. The white violets were as large as their cultivated blue relatives, and nodded from stems over a foot in length. Possibly it was because they formed such a small spot of color in that dark place, possibly they were of purer white than flowers of larger growth in stronger light; no matter what the reason, these deep forest violets were the coldest, snowiest white of any flower I ever have seen. They made arrow-head lilies

appear pearl white and daisies cream white compared with them.

Thinking of this caused me to notice the range of green colors also. The leaves and mosses near earth were the darkest, growing lighter through ferns, vines, bushes, and different tree leaves in never-ending shades. No one could have enumerated all of them. They were more variable and much more numerous than the grays. But in dim forest half-light all color appeared a shade paler than in mere woods.

From the all-encompassing volume of sound I endeavored to distinguish the instruments from the performers.

The water, the winds, and the trees combined in a rising and falling accompaniment that never ceased. The insects, birds, and animals were the soloists, most of them singing, while some were performing on instruments. Always there was the music of my own heart over some wondrous flower or landscape picture, or stirred to join in the chorus around me. The trees were large wind-harps, the trunks the framework, the branches the strings. These trunks always were wrapped in gray, but with each tree a differing shade. There were brown-gray, green-gray, blue-gray, dark-gray, light-gray, every imaginable gray, and many of them so vine-entwined and lichen-decorated it was difficult to tell exactly what color they were.

The hickory was the tatterdemalion; no other tree was so rough and ragged in its covering. Oak, elm, walnut, and ash, while deeply indented with the breaks of growth, had more even surface. The poplar, birch, and sycamore had the smoothest bark and showed the most color. The tall, straight birch did gleam "like silver," but to me the sycamore was more beautiful. The largest were of amazing size, whole branches a cream-white with big patches of green, and the rough bark of the trunks was a dirty yellow-gray. These trees always show most color in winter, but I do not know whether they really are brighter then, or whether

the absence of the green leaves makes them appear so. Anywhere near the river the trees grew larger, and their uplifted branches caught the air and made louder music, while the unceasing song of the water played a minor accompaniment. These big wind-harps were standing so close I could focus six of them, the least large enough to be considered unusual in broken wood, on one small photographic plate. Where several sprang from a common base some of them were forced to lean, but the great average grew skyward straight as pines, and in the stillest hour the wind whispered among the interlaced branches, and in a gale roared to drown the voice of the thunder.

Little trees beginning their upward struggle to reach the light caused me to feel that they were destroying pictures of great beauty. At last we found an elevation of some height and climbing it, secured the view that awaited us. As soon as we were level with the top of the undergrowth, that was a tangle in the most open spaces, not so dense where the trees grew closer together, it appeared to stretch away endlessly, making a variegated, mossy, green floor that at a little distance seemed sufficiently material to bear our weight. Knowing this to be an illusion, I sent my soul journeying, instead. Crowding everywhere arose the big, vine-entwined tree trunks, stretching from forty to seventy feet to their branching. The cool air of this enclosed space between the bush tops and the tree branches had a spicy fragrance. The carpet of green velvet below and the roof of green branches above formed a dominant emerald note; but it was mellowed with the soft grays of the tree trunks and tinted with the penetrant blue of the sky, so that the whole was a soft, blue-gray green, the most exquisite sight imaginable. All thought of the world outside vanished. The heart flooded with awe, adoration, and a great and holy peace. Here is the world's most beautiful Cathedral, where the unsurpassed tree-harps accompany the singers in

nature's grandest anthem. This is the abiding-place of the Almighty in the forest.

When we dared linger no longer and attempted to reach certain trees superb above their fellows, we found that a path must be cut before us for long distances, and then at times, for no apparent reason, we came into open spaces underfoot and thinner branching overhead. These were brown and gray-carpeted with the heaped dead leaves of many seasons, and glorified with flower color, but there were no grasses. It was in places such as these that the joy song of the human heart drowned all other music. On the rich brown floor, against the misty gray-green background, flashed the pale yellow of false foxglove, the loveliest and the typical flower of the forest.

The tall, smooth stems were high as my head, the leaves sparse and tender, the bloom large and profuse, and of warm shades of light-yellow impossible to describe, because they vary with age. The buds are a pure warm yellow, the flower cowslip color on the first day, creamy white on the second, the fallen blooms showering the dark floor almost white. These are the gloves the foxes wear when they travel the forest softly. Cultivated relatives of the family are not nearly so beautiful as the wild species.

I think this is true of the wild flowers, vines, and plants everywhere. Their hothouse relatives do not compare with them. Field and forest flowers are of more delicate color, they are simple and natural, and there is a touch of pure wildness in them akin to a streak in every heart. Of late people have been realizing this, and they have made efforts, not always agreeable to the plants, to remove and set them around houses and in gardens. Such flowers usually die a lingering death because they can not survive out of their element. The foxglove enters a more vigorous protest than any. It is as if the old mother of the family feared that when we saw her glorious shade-children we would steal them from their damp, dark home; and so, with

the cunning of her namesakes, the foxes, she taught all her family to reach down and find the roots of surrounding trees, twine around them, and grow fast, until they became veritable parasites and not only clung for protection, but to suck life, so that they quickly withered and died if torn away. The effort to transplant foxglove always reminds me of an attempt to remove old people who have lived long on one spot and sent the roots of their affections clinging around things they love. Then some change comes, and an effort is made to remove them to a different location and atmosphere. They end the same as deep forest flowers brought into the strong light of yard and garden; only as a rule people pine and die more quickly.

A few bees humming around the foxglove set me to watching for insect musicians. The pale flowers of deep forest were not attractive as was the growth outside. There was only an occasional butterfly. But there were millions of other insects singing everywhere around us, and the leaders were the locusts. Sometimes they flew so close, making music on wing, that we dodged and our ears rang. We caught several and examined them, and induced one to pose for us on a locust tree. They are an inch and a half in length, a rare green color with brown markings, and have large eyes, a stout, sharp tongue, silvery white legs, and long wing-shields, appearing as if cut from thinnest isinglass, the shorter true wing beneath.

These wing-shields are divided into small sections by veins that hold the transparent parts securely, and the outer edge has a stout rim. Using these rims for their strings, the crisp space for sounding-boards, and the femur of the hind legs for bows, the locust amazed us by not singing at all, for he fiddled away gayly as he led the insect orchestra. As far as we could hear through the forest his musicians followed his lead unceasingly, their notes rising and falling in volume, and they even played in flight. I could

not see how they flew, and fiddled on the wing-shields at the same time, but repeatedly I saw them do it.

Watching above me to try to learn how this music of flight was made, I forgot the locusts and began considering the roof of the forest. The branches lapped and interlaced so closely that I felt, if I had power to walk inverted like a fly, I could cross them as a floor. There was constant music up there, and the dominant note was the crow's, while the sweetest was the wood pewee's. There were many places where in the stout branching of tall trees the crows had built a sitting-room of a bushel of coarse twigs and lined it with finer material. Now all the families had moved out and gone picnicking among the trees.

None of them evinced retiring dispositions. They appeared alike at that height, and all I could tell of them was that they were crows. Their music was constant and, where undisturbed by our presence, of most interesting character. I could distinguish three distinct calls. They frequently uttered a guttural croak that seemed to translate "All right!" Then there was a sharp, vehement "Caw! Caw! Caw!" warning those of the family farther away of the fact that there was something unusual in the forest. It was used at a time and in the manner of a human being crying, "Look out! Some one is coming!" Then there was a syllabicated cry, consisting of five notes, that was their longest utterance and was delivered with tucked tail, half-lifted wings, and bobbing head, as if to make the speech impressive by gesture as well as sentiment. It scarcely would do to write of this production as a song, perhaps it might be called a recitative, to give it a little musical color. In very truth it resembled plain conversation and was used at such times and in such manner as to lead me to believe that passing crows were remarking to their friends: "Everything is all right with me. How goes life with you?"

I am rather fond of crows. They are so loving to each other that they arouse sentiment in my breast. I believe