

A BOOK-SHELF FOR THE MONTH

A BOOK OF NATURE AND LIFE

By Henry Litchfield West

The years which have passed over the head of John Burroughs have not dulled the keenness of his observation nor diminished the ardor of his enthusiasm. He is still the painstaking, unwearied, sympathetic chronicler of nature and nature's way, with the same fresh and interesting method of imparting knowledge. The charm of his work lies in his poetic and human instincts. He environs every denizen of the woods and fields with a subtle, palpitating influence that throbs with spontaneity and is not to be measured with foot and rule. He is not forbidding like Thoreau, but bathes himself and us in a warm, life-giving aura. Every word he utters is a genial invitation to become more intimately acquainted with nature, and to love her with the same devotion with which he worships at her feet.

Mr. Burroughs has chosen wisely in the title of his latest book. The volume is a combination of field and study—the first part dealing with the earth and the fulness thereof, and the second presenting the reflections of a man who has lived long amid surroundings which give a unique value to his varied comments on literature, science, and religion. His outdoor essays are written out of an inexhaustible store of knowledge and experience. Mr. Burroughs is not, however, a mere verbatim stenographer of nature. He is an interpreter as well as an observer. He does not submit a cold and precise report, un-

enlivened by a single byplay of humor or of human interest, but presents a record inspired by a kinship with the woods and fields and streams. It is the outpouring of a heart which experienced "a feeling of companionship with nature long prior to any conscious desire for accurate and specific knowledge about her works". When Mr. Burroughs says that he loved the flowers and the wild creatures, as most healthy children do, long before he knew that there was such a study as botany or natural history, he makes it clear to our understanding why his interpretation of nature has such a compelling appeal.

The value of Mr. Burroughs's work lies in the fact that he brings the mountain to Mahomet. It is through him that nature comes to our very doors. There are, unfortunately, so many men and women veneered with the crust of city life that their hearts fail to respond to the flashing of a star, the fragrance of flowers, or the singing of the birds; and even to those who are not thus hardened, all association with nature must necessarily be vicarious or second-hand. To this latter class the book of nature may be open winter and summer but it is certainly not always within reach. It is unquestionably true, as Mr. Burroughs asserts, that nature lore is absorbed in the air we breathe; that it awaits us at the side of the spring when we stoop to drink; that it drops upon us from the trees; and that it is written upon the rocks and ledges.

The trouble is, however, that with most of us the air we breathe is the

crowded and vitiated atmosphere of the city; that our horizon is a brick wall; that our woodland spring degenerates into the kitchen faucet; that our trees are sad specimens struggling for existence amid square yards of concrete; and that the only rocks and ledges which come within our ken are visible in the holes wherein will be laid the foundations for a new building. To such as are confined in the cities, Mr. Burroughs's books are like manna in the wilderness. They are food and drink to parched and hungry souls. "Natural history", he says, "is on the wing and all about us on the foot. It hides in holes; it perches on trees; it runs to cover under the stones and into the stone walls; it soars, it sings, it drums, it calls by day, it barks and prowls and hoots by night." Unfortunately, the natural history which thus environs Mr. Burroughs represents for us a far-off land until he transforms distance into proximity with the magic of his pen.

The lucidity and simplicity which Mr. Burroughs insists are the main requisites of literary style are happily exemplified by him on every page, and are the factors which make his message so intelligible. "There is a world of good writing", he says, "which yet differs from literature as a tree differs from a pile of lumber." He wants his page to fit the mind as water fits the hand, and the meaning to be conveyed in the clearest, freshest, most direct and vivid manner, without thought of style. "O, to be natural", he exclaims, "to have the quality of freshness and inevitableness, of the unlabored, the spontaneous!" Surely he has this quality beyond all peradventure. In one paragraph he prays for what the gods seem already to have bestowed upon him:

To be brisk and not flippant, to be original and not strained; to be smooth and not polished, to be suggestive and not obscure and indefinite, to be bright and not brilliant, to have wit without the sting, to have humor without the guffaw, to have learning without pedantry, to have joy without hilarity—"sober on a fund of joy", as Emerson says—to be serious and not heavy, to teach and not moralize, to be lucid and not superficial, to be eloquent and not rhetorical, to have common sense and not be commonplace—this is my prayer.

It is in this spirit of spontaneity and sanity that Mr. Burroughs demonstrates his sympathetic intimacy with nature. The music of the white-throats is "a sweet, quavering ribbon of song", and the soft, nasal call of the nuthatch is "a soft interrogation in the ear of the sylvan gods". With careful pains he observes and records the transformation of the caterpillar into the butterfly. He has an eye for beauty. "There is no prettier bit of natural history on four legs than the red fox." Who else would have discovered the likeness between the faces of the jumping spider and the woodchuck, or who else knows that the burdock prodigally seeks reproduction with six thousand seeds upon a single plant? He finds a golden-winged warbler's nest in an old lane that he has traveled for forty years.

Never before had the road yielded him such treasure. He finds out that rabbits sleep with their eyes open; he follows the chipmunk to its hole, and searches the orchard for hidden secrets. He ponders over the ways of the insects and concludes that their intelligence is the intelligence of nature—it is action and not reflection. He leans lovingly over the nests of young birds, and by observation proves that the parent birds do not teach their young the art of flying. He notes, also, that when the young birds leave their nests the movement is final. "It is the word of fate. They

will not come back." He does not confine himself to the surface, but finds that under a stone is a chapter in nature's infinite book of secrecy which most persons skip, but which is well worth perusal. Nothing seems hidden from him, but so delicately and lovingly does he reveal nature's secrets that there is not the slightest suggestion of intrusion.

The detail which engages his eye does not, however, restrict his mind. It is not alone the bluebird and the robin in his own field which he sees. What happens in springtime within sight of his own window is happening just across every other threshold; so that throughout a long, broad belt of states, about several millions of homes, and over several millions of farms, the same flood-tide of bird-life is creeping or eddying or sweeping over the land. He says:

I fancy that on almost any day in mid-May the flickers are drilling their holes into a million or more decayed trees between the Hudson and the Mississippi; that any day a month earlier the phoebes are starting their nests under a million or more woodsheds or bridges or overhanging rocks; that several million of robins are carrying mud and straws to sheltered projections about buildings, or to the big forked branches in the orchards.

This migration of the birds, however, is something more than a mere fact to be narrated. It is "one more assurance of the unfailing return of spring and the never-ending joy and fecundity of life".

No review of "Field and Study" would be complete without a genuine tribute to that portion of the volume which deals with abstract subjects. In these pages Mr. Burroughs bares his soul. Much that he has said before in desultory fashion is here moulded into concrete expression. For instance, it has always been apparent that Mr. Burroughs, while religious

in the deep, broad sense, has never been bound by creed or dogma. In this latest book he makes his position clear. Answering the complaint that in his books there is too much nature and not enough God, he says that this seems to him "like complaining that there is too much about the daylight and not enough about the sun". He looks upon nature not merely as the garment of God but as his living integument. With a manlike God—the maker and ruler of the universe, existing apart from it—he can do nothing. "When I write about nature and make much of her beauties and wonders", he says, "I am writing about God."

When he goes further, however, and asserts that the lay mind is becoming more devout than the clerical mind because it is more inclined to act upon the literal truth of the assertion that the earth is divine and that God is everywhere, and when he asks: "Are we ourselves anything more than the tracks of the Eternal in the dust of the earth?", we may be sure that he awakens some qualms in the minds of the ultra-orthodox. His belief in the existence of a nature-God—a God which is nature and a nature which is God—and his assertion that God must be dehumanized and regarded as the material universe which surrounds us and of which we are an integral part, comprise a very definite philosophy, even though the creed-bound may not be free to accept it. It is a philosophy thoroughly in harmony with a life which has been spent close to nature and which reckons the good and the bad—the building of a bird's-nest and the eruption of a volcano—as merely identifying God with universal nature in all her multiform beneficent and malevolent aspects.

In thus dethroning the God of creed, tradition, and superstition, even while humbly recognizing the existence of a soul in the universe, Mr. Burroughs does not become a worshiper at the feet of materialistic science. "In my excursions into nature", he says, "science plays a part but not a leading part"; and he adds that "science is always a good seasoning, but one does not want too much of a good seasoning". For all that science has done and all that the doctrine of evolution has unfolded, he has a full meed of praise, but science as the main inspiration of our lives is an unsatisfying portion. "To reduce our mental and spiritual life", he says, "to terms of physics and physiology is to reduce the flower to ashes, life processes to chemical reactions." Against this purely materialistic idea his mind revolts. There is still to be explained, he says, the connection of our psychic life with our physical life, a problem as difficult to solve as the connection of physical life with inorganic nature. We find in Mr. Burroughs's view, therefore, a crystallization of the modern tendency to depart from a rigid acceptance of the biblical idea of God, while not accepting science as a complete substitute for a great, ruling, universal soul.

It may be said that these conclusions regarding the problems associated with nature and life have no place in the writings of a naturalist. We do not share this opinion. It is worth while knowing the convictions which have come to a deeply reflective mind through long communing with nature, especially when they are expressed in uncontroversial fashion. Mr. Burroughs states his views simply and sincerely, and in the manner of a man whose thoughts are always unconcealed and whose mental honesty

is not a matter of doubt. Perhaps, after all, he has given us the broadest and the most satisfying view of the great mystery of the universe. A realization that nature and God are one will render unnecessary the ancient admonition that we must look from nature up to nature's God.

Field and Study. By John Burroughs.
Houghton Mifflin Co.

MALICE THAT IS NOT MALICIOUS

By John Bunker

To pass judgment on one's distinguished contemporaries is a fascinating business, and though it is a difficult business as well—at least to pass true judgment—that only adds to the fascination. The latest to succumb is Gerald Cumberland, an English journalist who has had the advantage of personal acquaintance with most of the people he writes about,—or perhaps we should have said disadvantage, for he does not give us portraits nor even transmit to us the clever remarks of his subjects. Apparently there were no clever remarks. "Though for an hour he [Masefield] continued talking, he said nothing—at least nothing that I remember."

Nevertheless, though the author has not the knack of vivid portraiture nor successfully teases his lions into roaring for our benefit, he does have some shrewd observations to make on his own account. For instance, about Masefield he goes on to say:

The extraordinary thing about him was that, in spite of his timidity, his seeming apprehensiveness, he left on my mind a deep impression of adventure—not of a man who sought physical, but spiritual, risks. I think he is a poet who cannot refrain from exacerbating his own soul, who must at all costs place his mind in danger and escape only at the last moment.