

A Summer Day's Observations

By John Burroughs

As Interviewed by Clifton Johnson

In Two Parts—I.



WEST PARK is a small and scattered village of farm-houses about sixty miles from New York, up the Hudson River. Its chief distinction, so far as I know, is that it is the home of John Burroughs. The West Shore Railroad has a station there, but the trains that stop are very few and far between. I reached West Park at half-past six in the morning. The station lies in a wide hollow a half-mile back from the river. There were several houses in sight, a bare, newly built church, and a primitive wooden store. In the east the sun shone clear and hot, the birds were singing in the trees, and from a wooded western hill came a strange humming sound, like the distant cawing of a colony of hums. This was the music of the seventeen-year locusts.

The station-master said that Mr. Burroughs always walked down for his mail by seven o'clock, and I went up the road and sat down on a rib of rock, in the shade of an elm, and waited for him.

Presently I saw approaching a man with a full white beard, who looked like a vigorous, elderly farmer. He had on neither coat nor vest, and his raiment, from his straw hat to his dusty shoes, had plainly had much experience with sun and weather. But he looked comfortable and independent enough to make fashion and conformity ashamed of themselves and envious. This was John Burroughs.

Mr. Burroughs's farm is a seventeen-acre square of hill-side that slopes steeply back from the river to a roadway on the ridge. The stone house is hidden from the road by a little grove of evergreens. Beyond it are fruit-trees, and then the cultivated acres of currant-bushes and grape-vines. Half-way down the hill is a rustic study, and near it a little open-walled summer-house that overlooks the vineyard and the quiet river, with its steamers and tug-towed canal-boats and drifting sails. In the summer-house we spent most of the day, though there were some not unpleasant interruptions, as when we went to pick peas and cherries for dinner, or when Mr. Burroughs went to look after some barrels of fertilizer, or to give orders to his men. What he said was to me like the reading of a charming and varied book. He had at ready command the resources of a long life of thought and observation, and his expression was both pithy and picturesque, whatever the subject. I had heard that he was a farmer, and had supposed that it must be some sort of fancy farming, for recreation, not profit; but Mr. Burroughs said:

"No, I make it pay. I do it for the money that's in it. I walk among my vines, and I watch them and prune them and care for them. I don't do everything myself, but I see it done. The time I pitch in most seriously is when we are harvesting the grapes. Then there is a lot of work I do personally, besides having five men and three or four women to look after. I lose in weight about ten pounds a month at that season. My aim is to grow very fine fruit and choice kinds, and to market it early. My grapes are all gone and sold about the time the other people about here begin to cut. The result is that I get much the best price. Most people let the grass grow among their vines and mow it just before picking, but you see I keep the ground cultivated and stirred up all the time. I use Canada hard-wood ashes for fertilizer a good deal. In them you find all the elements ready for absorption. Stable manure is coarse. The ashes are vital and quick. They have more virtues than show up in any chemical analysis. Yet I find I can't use them too exclusively. They force a too rapid growth of the young canes, which get brittle and break off in the wind. I'm trying German slag meal now, which is very rich in phosphoric

acid. It is made of waste from the furnaces, and looks like a deep-brown soot.

"We have just pulled the new shoots free from the wires. If we didn't, they would run too much to wood and the grapes would suffer. When you pull them off from the wires, they droop down and seem to stop to think. It checks them at once. The vines always set more fruit than they ought to, and this superabundance has to be cut off. When we do this, the ground in places will be fairly covered with the green clusters. Visitors say, 'What a shame, to cut off the fruit that way!' But pruning is the secret of success in grape-growing, or in literature. Prune, prune, prune! You've got to have the courage to cut out your pretty periods, or you're done for.

"I tried one vine last year to see what it would do without pruning. There were eighty clusters on it, and it was a question if it could ripen them all. Well, it did it, but it was slow. It netted forty-five pounds of grapes. Yet I made more from the vines that ripened twenty-five pounds early.

"Yes, fruit-growing is my chief source of income. I have several wealthy neighbors, and they grow fruit, too. They say they don't see how I make anything—they can't. But they don't have to. I tell them if they had to, they would, and there'd be an end of their complaining that everything cost them more to grow than the fruit would market for. I make it pay, and pay handsomely.

"I have to be a farmer—I never should be content otherwise. I come of a family that has always lived on the soil. Muscular labor brings its recompenses. You relish your sleep and your victuals. I have as much comfort in being tired as in anything else. Sometimes I will take a long walk just for the pleasure it'll be, when I get back, to sit down—it's such a luxury!

"There's a marsh-hawk. Don't you see it—far down the hill, near the trees along the shore? I think it has a nest somewhere not far off, or it wouldn't come so freely. It's the deadly enemy of the birds, and they know it. Everything skulks and opens its eyes when he comes around. How the birds will scream and abuse him, and follow him about! There's a king-bird after him now. King-birds are very saucy. You'll see them perch on the back of some of the biggest hawks we have and worry them. But the marsh-hawk can make a very quick upward turn in its flight and strike its talons so suddenly into a pursuer as to make it dangerous. The king-birds, and all the birds, seem to know the difference. They keep a respectful distance, and are ready to rush into a tree where he can't follow if he turns on them.

"Do you hear my wood-thrush? He begins every afternoon about four o'clock and sings until sundown. There he is—behind us on a twig of that tree-trunk. See how well he carries himself—what fine manners and breeding! I never knew a wood-thrush to steal fruit. They only take what is fallen to the ground—never pick it from the trees. He is the finest songster of our groves and fields—his song has such hymnlike qualities and is so perfectly sincere and melodious. The hermit-thrush has a still more beautiful song, but it is so secluded a bird that few of us ever hear it.

"If anything were to happen to my bird or its nest, it would stop its song, and I would know there was trouble instantly. There was another thrush in the early season that had a nest down by the shore. It had a most monotonous song, that was utterly lacking in the golden trill that this bird has. It kept harping on one string, and I thought to myself that if I lived under the hill that song would be intolerable, and I would have to take my gun and put a stop to it. One day the bird left off singing, and I didn't hear it again. Its nest had been robbed. But lately I have heard that same doleful harping down in

the woods in the next field, and I know it must have started a new nest there.

"People have an idea that all birds of a kind sing alike, but in reality they differ just as people do. There is often a Tennyson or a Browning among them that has surpassing qualities in its song. Among orioles and wood-thrushes and bobolinks, and all the birds, there are master songsters. You can hear others, too, that are far below the average.

"I knew a bobolink once that was unfortunate that way. His voice was hoarse and broken. Yet he was just as proud of his song. He went through it with the same ecstasy, and ended it with the same air, as if he'd done something wonderful.

"A bobolink doesn't sing close by its nest, but always within earshot. In his song he is merely expressing the joy of home-making, his love for mate and little ones, his delight in nature—ah! the bobolink is a wonderful songster. Last May I went up to my old home in the Catskills. I wanted to go at that particular season to hear the bobolinks in the meadows where I knew them as a boy. There's no place equal to the Catskills for bobolinks. They have a more pleasing song there than in other parts of the country. There's a tinkling in the song as we hear it around here. It hasn't the resonance and copiousness of the songs on the high meadows of those hill-farms. I don't know why—it may be the air.

"All English birds have a quality of harshness in their songs, and, at the same time, of strength. Their skylark hasn't the melody of our bobolink, nor his rollicking, devil-may-care sort of manner. Yet the song of the skylark is such an expression of buoyancy, of hardy, virile, country strength—the utterance of a rapt poet! The bobolink isn't so serious—he acts a bit tipsy.

"There was a curious piece in the 'Evening Post' the other day about bobolinks. The writer said that to hear them at their best you wanted to sit on the haycocks in the fields on a summer evening. But by haying-time the bobolink has lost his earlier song of rivalry and happiness. He sings only in snatches, and he scolds. The article went on to tell how the old birds sang, and then added, 'and the young birds join in the chorus.' Well, that's rather ridiculous, for the young birds have a pip, and no song at all. Another thing this writer said was that I had said the bobolink was something like an English meadow-lark. But there's no such bird that I've ever heard of.

"We have a true skylark on the Catskill hills. His manner is exactly the same as that of the English skylark. He climbs up and up in a hovering ecstasy of flight till he soars three or four hundred feet in the air. But he has the rudest and most rudimentary song. He seems like a bird whose voice is almost shut off by a bad cold. It looks as if he'd just begun to sing. No doubt he will improve, for the law of evolution operates among birds just as it does in everything else. Bird-songs change. It's just the same as with our speech. Supposing we had no written language, two hundred years from now a person wouldn't be able to understand us. I've heard a robin with the song of a brown thrasher. The imitation was so perfect that I couldn't believe it was a robin till I saw the bird. I know a certain valley in the Catskills where the bobolinks have a song all their own. The bobolinks in that particular valley have added to their song a peculiar bell-like note. It seems to be the fad there. One of the birds was still different. He had a strain that didn't harmonize with the rest of his song. I don't think the others will take that up.

"I think the love of nature, as you and I have it, has to be acquired. Children love nature just as they do apples and cherries and sweets. They like to be under the trees and to follow along the brooks. Their enjoyment is not æsthetic or artistic; and it would be a mistake to try to develop such enjoyment in any set or mechanical way. There's a difference in children. Some never will have any marked feeling for nature, however long they live. It's like the religious instinct—it has to be inborn—some have it, and some don't.

"I have been asked to write school-books to help children to love nature, but I don't see my way to it. Stimulated as

a feeling and a sentiment it's all right. But to give them a lot of facts, to make it a task—there's no good in that. I wouldn't even attempt to teach botany to children till they had an interest in the plants. I don't attempt to teach my boy flowers, birds, or anything else—as a task. If he asks me anything, or in some way has his interest aroused, I'm glad to help. I fish with him, I work with him, I walk with him. In an indirect way he picks up a great deal of knowledge, and he finds out things I don't know myself. Let children soak themselves in the atmosphere of nature. Don't stick it on the outside. Let them absorb it. What we want is the love of these things. If we have that, it deepens our enjoyment of life.

"I believe in going to nature at any time rather than to books. A while ago I visited a select school in New York City, and one of the teachers and I walked up in the Park with the boys. I helped them to identify the live birds we saw. That's always in order. That's the way the Greeks taught. They walked and talked. Afterwards we took the boys to the museum. You know there are a great many different kinds of woods shown there. We talked about those, and the boys asked me questions. One boy pointed out the fact that while some of the tree-sections showed remnants of old knots clear to the heart, others were free from them. Now, he knew that every tree must have had knots at some time all the way up the trunk, and that was a fair question. Then I explained how certain trees had the power of absorbing the knots. There's the pine and the hemlock—they sponge out their record. They climb and pull the ladder up after them.

"If you dump a lot of bare facts on a child, he comes away from school without any love of books or of nature. It's always been the crying want—teachers who will inspire. It always will be, I suppose. Children are taught in a mechanical way instead of a vital way. There are not enough teachers of enthusiasm.

"The way they teach literature in the colleges is calculated to kill any love for it that one may happen to have before he goes to them. It seems to me I would lose my love of Shakespeare if I had to dissect him, and find out the meaning of every word and expression. I want to ride buoyantly over the waves. I want to feel the wind and the motion—not talk about them. If I had to teach literature, I hardly know myself how I would do it. You can't by bearing on—you can't by mere intellectual force on a book show its charm. It appeals to the emotions. You've got to approach it in a different way. You must be fluid. All I should hope to do would be to give the student the key to the best literature. We would read books together. We would read good books and we would read poor books. I would say, 'Well, we won't talk: we'll read and see. Here's a poor book—don't you see? It's overdrawn—'tisn't delicate.' I would get at books in their sentiment and general character, not in their details. If you tear it all into bits, you haven't the thing itself any more.

"Not long ago a woman in the West sent me some manuscripts about birds and outdoor subjects. I gave one of them to my boy and asked him to read it. He went through it, and I asked him what he thought of it.

"'Well,' he said, 'she makes too much fuss. I like the real thing itself.'

"You see, unless we are quiet and simple, whether we teach or write, ideas are lost sight of, and you hear only the rattle of the words.

"One of the most charming things I see in the spring is the child going to school with its hands full of flowers. I always respond to that. Yet it isn't a clearly defined love for the beautiful that prompts the flower-gathering. There is only a vague feeling behind. If, when the child brings in the flowers, the teacher talks about them, and tells her scholars something about them, that is very nice.

"I've had once in a while to talk to the young women at their colleges, and I try to stimulate their interest in things as much as I can. I don't dump a lot of technicalities on them. I try to find out how closely they observe. For instance, I tell them about the dog-tooth violet. It's a kind of lily, and grows from a bulb six or

eight inches down in the ground. "This bulb," I say, "starts on the ground's surface. How does it get down there where we find it? I think I know, but do you?" I give them a hint, and let them follow it up if they will. I let them teach themselves, and I let the work be done with love, not as a duty.

"After the indoor talk we go out for a walk. At one place we were to make an early start, and by four or five o'clock in the morning there were forty or fifty girls on my doorstep—a great pool of girls there, bound not to miss their walk. When I heard them whispering and moving about, out I came, and we started, they all crowding after and stepping on my heels all along, they were so anxious to hear everything I said. But that didn't matter—I had stout shoes on!

"The ear can be taught to discriminate among sounds, just as the sense of touch gives us varied impressions through our finger-tips. I think I do this discriminating unconsciously. If I hear a sound, it requires no effort to decide what it is—whether a bird-cry, song, or call, or the drone of some insect. Every sound has a meaning. You must be able to take a hint; that is the great secret of observing nature. You must see what is going on, and draw conclusions. I visited, some months ago, the grave of Phillips Brooks at Mount Auburn Cemetery, and while I was there I found a bird's nest right at the foot of his grave. The way I found it was this: I heard the cry of a bird in distress, and when I looked about I saw a little chickadee with food in its beak. That was hint enough. Then I looked again, and I saw an iron gate-post with a hole rusted just above a hinge, and inside was the nest.

"One day I went out for a walk with the girls of Wheaton Seminary. I would call their attention to the birds, their flight, habits, nests. We would analyze the notes we heard, and, from the medley of sounds that nature is full of, pick out such as we could recognize. In one wood I heard a rare bird, the solitary vireo, singing. He was up among the tree-tops, and there was a note of anxiety in his song. I knew he must have a nest somewhere near, and I said, 'Now we'll explore and see if we can find that nest.' It was like a cathedral there among the pines, cool and deep-shadowed. One of the girls found the nest. She was a country girl, and she had sharp eyes. It was on a drooping limb there in the dim aisles of the forest, and I reached up with a stick and pulled the limb down. The female was on the nest, and flew out only at the last moment. The nest was exquisitely beautiful, and after the girls had admired it I let the branch go back gently to its old position. The girls were full of enthusiasm over this exploit, and the more so because they had found a nest that I had not found before myself.

"Girls are always more responsive than boys in such ways. Boys think it is more manly to feel an interest in boats, gunning, and baseball. Girls are sharp-eyed; they have a certain delicacy that boys lack."



The Passion for Perfection

By Hamilton W. Mabie

It is one of the pains of the artistic temperament that its exaltations of mood and its ecstasies of spirit must be largely solitary. The air of this century is not genial to that intimacy with beauty which solicits easy interchange of confidences among those who enjoy it. The mass of men are preoccupied and unsensitive on that side of life which has for the artist the deepest reality; they are given over to pursuits which are imperative in their demands and fruitful in their rewards, but which lead far from the pursuit of beauty. There have been times when the artistic temper, if not widely shared, has been generally understood, and such times will come again when the modern world becomes more thoroughly harmonized with itself; meantime the man who has the joys of the artistic temperament will accept them as a sufficient consolation for its pains.

For the essence of this temperament is not so much its sensitiveness to every revelation of the beautiful as its

passion for perfection. There is in the life of the artist an element of pain which in men of coarser mold never goes beyond a dumb sense of discontent: for the artist is compelled to live with his ideals. Other men have occasional glimpses of their ideals; the artist lives his life in their presence and under their searching glances. A man is in the way to become genuine and noble when his ideals draw near and make their home with him instead of floating before him like summer clouds, forever dissolving and reforming on the distant horizon; but he is also in the way of very real anguish of spirit. Our ideals, when we establish them under our own roofs, are as relentless as the Furies who thronged about Orestes; they will not let us rest. The world may applaud, but if they avert their faces, reputation is a mockery and success a degradation. The passion for perfection is the divinest possession of the soul, but it makes all lower gratifications, all compromises with the highest standards, impossible. The man whom it dominates can never taste the easy satisfactions which assuage the thirst of those who have it not; for him it must always be the best or nothing.

Flaubert, Mr. James tells us, ought always to be cited as one of the martyrs of the plastic idea; the "torment of style" was never eased in his case, and, despite his immense absorption and his tireless toil, he failed to touch the invisible goal for which he set out. "Possessed," says one of his critics, who is also a devotee of the supreme excellence, "of an absolute belief that there exists but one way of expressing one thing, one word to call it by, one adjective to qualify, one verb to animate it, he gave himself to superhuman labor for the discovery, in every phrase, of that word, that verb, that epithet. In this way he believed in some mysterious harmony of expression, and, when a true word seemed to him to lack euphony, still went on seeking another with invincible patience, certain that he had not yet got hold of the unique word. . . . A thousand preoccupations would beset him at the same moment, always with this desperate certitude fixed in his spirit: among all the expressions in the world there is but *one*—one form, one mode—to express what I want to say."

To a mind capable of absolute devotion, such an ideal as Flaubert set before him not only draws him on through laborious days, deaf to the voices of pleasure, but consumes him with an inward fire. The aim of the novelist was not simply to set the best words in the best order; it was to lay hold upon perfection—to touch those ultimate limits beyond which the human spirit cannot go, and where that spirit stands face to face with the absolute perfection. This passionate pursuit of the finalities of form and expression is as far removed from the pursuit of mere craftsmanship as art itself is separated from mere mechanical skill. And yet so little is the real significance of art understood among us that it is continually confused with craftsmanship, and spoken of as something apart from a man's self, something born of skill and akin to the mechanical, instead of being the very last and supreme outflowering of that within us which is spontaneous and inspired. In a fine burst of indignation at this profanation of one of the greatest words in human speech, Mr. Aldrich says:

"Let art be all in all," one time I said,
And straightway stirred the hypercritical gall:
I said not, "Let technique be all in all,"
But art—a wider meaning. Worthless, dead—
The shell without its pearl, the corpse of things—
Mere words are, till the spirit lends them wings.
The poet who breathes no soul into his lute
Falls short of art: 'twere better he were mute.

The workmanship wherewith the gold is wrought
Adds yet a richness to the richest gold:
Who lacks the art to shape his thought, I hold,
Were little poorer if he lacked the thought.
The statue's slumbers were unbroken still
Within the marble, had the hand no skill.
Disparage not the magic touch that gives
The formless thought the grace whereby it lives!

Flaubert did not touch the goal in spite of his heroic toil, and largely because of that toil. For he sought too strenuously, with intention too insistent and dominant; he