

MY ENVIRONMENT

BY ROBERT SPARKS WALKER

MY peculiar domestic situation, which for the last twelve years has made me both a father and brother to my young son, and for almost four years, serving as a mother, has chained me relentlessly to a city lot where for the most part my leisure from household duties is spent beneath two fig trees in my back yard.

Friends have pitied me, some have criticised me rather severely, a few have loved me, some have counseled me, and all have been very liberal in their advice of what I should do.

But with all the sorrows and family misfortunes that have come to me, I am happy. It is entirely possible for a human being to be quite happy, though stocked with worries and filled with disappointments.

Not many people are practical philosophers enough to know that discontent, sorrow, disappointment, and drudgery cannot destroy genuine happiness. My close communion with Nature binds me securely to the source of all happiness; therefore, within the last twelve years, it has withstood the bitter strain of grief, misfortune, the unfaithfulness of supposed-friends, and every other enemy to which the human soul is the legitimate heir.

So beneath my fig tree where the clouds float lazily and dreamily over and look down upon me in my chair with my books and paper, I shall trample my misfortunes, ills, sorrows, and disappointments under my feet, and here record for a season my observations of Nature, and perchance, I may say something of the deep messages she speaks to me.

There is a force, a power, and a purpose behind every movement in Nature. Activity in Nature means power and force, whether it finds expression in the movement of my pencil along

the smooth surface of a sheet of paper, or in the cricket's lullaby that now soothes me, when nothing else reaches my ears save the distant switch engine that is struggling to disentangle a long line of freight boxes.

I have sat beneath my fig trees at most all hours during the day, and have often visited them during the night, but the most impressive language that Nature speaks to me is that which I hear at daybreak. When I was a boy on the farm necessity on the wings of a father's voice, taught me to arise at four o'clock. My editorial work that began shortly after I left the farm and became my father's successor for twenty-one years, and then my nature study and literary work inherited the same early hour to which they have claimed indisputable title. This habit has never been a rigid master, for above every other earthly delight that of opening my sleeping eyes at the same time that the earth opens hers is one of the most joyful experiences I find in life.

It does not require constant access to the entire world to make one happy. My little piece of earth where I have lived for the past twenty years measures only fifty-six by a hundred and thirty-five feet. With the exception of my walks into nearby woodlands, mountains, hills, and meadows, Nature has said to me, "Take your small lot and make the most of it and be happy." Still, much of the time I am very discontented, but never unhappy. I believe that I know the things that steal one's happiness. I certainly do not desire to appear as being boastful when I say that thus far I have been able to steer around the fungi that cause unhappiness, but I am willing to allow discontent to run unfettered.

Discontent is a strong elephant that is securely chained to my ambition, and I let it heave, pull, and struggle all that it will for I know that it is working for my welfare. If I cannot write a better piece of poetry, or a better essay to-day than I did yesterday, something is wrong and discontentment is off duty. I have a few books to my credit and many magazine articles, stories and poems, but I have never written anything thus far that approaches my ideal. Everything is faulty. My dissatisfaction is the kind of discontent that I have reference to in the foregoing paragraphs.

I am not progressing in the few years that have been allotted me, if I am unable to see a different color in the sunrise and sunset to-day which I did not see yesterday, and the day before. My

life is becoming stagnant if I for a single day fail to move my mental feet forward at least in an attempted step, whether I take one inch or ten inches at a stride.

Beneath my fig tree my rising sun laps my face with a golden tongue, looks down upon me at midday as a father worships his child, and at evening with longing and anxious eyes stares into my face and says, "You have acted honorably in my presence today; I shall trust you behave as nobly until I see you again in the morning." Where is the wretch so wicked and untrustworthy who could think of disobeying and disappointing him? Just like a human body is arranged like a small world in itself, so do every twenty-four hours arrange themselves in a miniature year. Sunrise is springtime to me, noon is summer, sunset is autumn, and night is winter!

The early morning is my heavenly morsel, and I am glad to be able to place on my tongue two hours at a time before it is melted by confusion! When my door bell begins to ring and the ice-man screams his goods, and vegetable venders cry their green food products as if they were trying to awaken our antipodes, my thoughts have never become so domesticated as to remain at home, but like a flock of wild turkeys take flight and leave me for the tall and quiet mountains from whence they do not return until the following morning.

I have often wondered why an ice-man employs such an unnatural and inhuman voice as he drives slowly through the street! His words are not English, and sound no more like it than the noise of a barking seal in the ocean. It is an excruciating sound that we can imagine belonging to the huge extinct animals of a low order, yet the public tolerates it, pays fifty cents a hundred pounds for his cold product and encourages him to pass both his icy voice and frozen water to the neighbors living in the next block!

So far as I know, I introduced Amoor River privet into my city, several years ago, and now it is an odd-looking dwelling house that has not a green hedge of this ornamental plant growing about it. My hedge on the sides and east end of my backyard stands ten feet high. It is one of the most diplomatic creatures I have ever met, and far more tactful than I or any of the other members of my family am. For many years it has stood thus around

me and said by its dense but pleasant looks, to hundreds of would-be spectators and neighbors, "You must not see into my master's private office." And not in its lifetime has it ever offended a single person. It has completely walled my backyard as a circle of palisades. Winter or summer, I can always trust it to stand between me and curious eyes, and yet at the same time it attracts the kind of visitors that I am seeking for knowledge and entertainment. It is astonishing the number of birds and little peoples like aphides, ants, moths, walkingsticks, mantides, leaf hoppers, caterpillars, and others that it so royally entertains that some of them come to see me every summer.

A Paulownia tree stands at the northeast corner with a roundish dome, bearing an army of brown budded spikes that like some renowned magician will open each bud-box and let a purple flower fly out next year before the tree has opened its leaf buds.

My rocker sitting beneath the Celestial fig tree, whose crown is my canopy, keeps me facing the Paulownia tree, and its slanting leaf-roof glides my eyes and thoughts skyward. It has pointed out many a high cloud and lofty thought!

A galvanized garage that is now trying to rust, and rants for paint after fourteen years, rears up between me and the alley. Some morning glory vines that have climbed one corner and cunningly concealed their stems behind the tin covering at the base, reappear at the top where they cluster and reach out to the grape arbor and tangle the branches of sunflowers five feet away. A morning glory is offensively affectionate.

At my right a grape arbor with chestnut legs twenty years old, joined by slender slats with fungi and lichens feasting on them, supports two grape vines old enough for human citizenship. It does not hold itself erect, but reminds me of a wobbly legged calf, which seems unwilling to trust all of its weight on its legs, lest they break in two.

A coal house with a capacity of not more than six tons, veneered with old window blinds, hides like a porch spider in daytime, leans against the alley with its face against the grape arbor.

A Keiffer pear tree stands fourteen years in height in the southeast corner, while an old blackjack tree leans against the southwest corner of my house. How ancient is this blackjack tree, and yet how modern it is! Whether I have a true conception of a tree or

not, to me it is a living creature with the senses of a human being. It is well that no tree can speak above a whisper. Think of the confusion when a neighborhood of them found something to gossip about! The arms of my blackjack tree reach up to hold a radio aerial for a neighbor on the next corner, and it lifts my telephone wire above the hedgetop. It is thus constantly helping me and my neighbor, besides doing the usual duties of a forest tree.

Whether the deed I have to my property gives me a title as far as the moon in the sky, matters little, for I am daily enjoying this aerial property, and its passengers as freely as if I owned them in fee simple.

The fact is, it gives me glints, glimpses, and gleams of the only property that so far as I know cannot be mutilated, defiled, or plundered by man. Wonderful clouds loiter above this space. Some are monstrous heaps of ice cream that are constantly turning about. Others are flat, some speckled, and others are mere scaly sheets. How thankful I am that no human can reach so far and slice, hack, mutilate or pluck this composite vapory flower!

When they are gone, the nighthawks, chimney swifts, and swallows take possession of the space. It is startling how high the purple martin sometimes ventures, seemingly a mile or more from the earth, a mere speck against a stack of white clouds. And when they have gone with the sun, save the nighthawk, the stars bloom out, and there comes to visit me, Altair, Vega, Denib, Capella, Jupiter, Orion, Mars and other celestial flowers that please me with their purity and beauty as do the flowers that open at my feet.

Again I am glad for the assurance that here is a section of Nature's garden that cannot be touched by the hand of man, and one that is placed so every human being with eyes to see may have the opportunity to enjoy. When I leave it I know that between me and to-morrow evening, unless the clouds cheat me of its view, I shall have no occasion to worry over the possibility of some thief breaking through and stealing any of the specimens while I am gone.

Any time when the sky is clear and the sun has departed to bestow light and warmth to his other half of humanity and vegetation, I know that I can have an optic conference with many celestial celebrities. And, they too, are much like human beings. Here

are some of the first magnitude whose heads and shoulders are lifted high above their neighbors, and others which are probably brighter than our sun, but have shy dispositions, or maybe timid, and with a retiring disposition. Others are so tiny that they sparkle and then go out like the flickering light of the firefly.

In the morning, I simply turn my rocker around and move it eight feet, and I am under a fig tree five years old, which hides me from the direct sunbeams and then when the sun moves his position, I turn my chair around, and face the east, sitting under a fig tree with a body that is ten years old, but eighteen years in the ground. It is fitting that the younger tree protects me while the day is young, but as it grows older, the older tree takes charge of me.

Such a situation, as small as it may seem, with the environment of natural growths, brings me more species of wild birds, more insects, more spiders, more pillbugs, more snails, and other creatures than many places I have visited twenty miles away in the country.

Only two creations living in my neighborhood, besides the trees, that I know, peek into my private outdoor apartment. One is climbing false buckwheat that has wound itself gracefully about a downspout on my neighbor's house, traveling fifteen feet into the air. The other is an humble gourd vine that has the ambition to see over my hedge, and it has ascended a latticed porch to the roof of the second story.

When the wind blows its leaves and blossoms boldly flirt with me.

I sit in the direct path of a faithful sundial whose copper gnomon is ever pointing at me. It is not a scornful gesture, for it constantly reminds me of the few years that life has in store for me, and that I must work faithfully and daily if I succeed in accomplishing a half of the things that appear on my program. For twenty years without a tick in sunny weather, it has truthfully shifted its shadow first left, then right, and its dark reports have never been questioned as to their accuracy. Disputations may arise with the owners of other timepieces, but a properly set sundial is ever dependable.

A tiny rock garden twenty feet in length leads out to my right, where almost a hundred kinds of wild flowers have found a congenial home. Here I find a plant every week that runs to meet me

bearing some fresh bit of news of a new visitor that has arrived on foot or wing, or some newly opened flower is ready to offer me mental and optical diversion when I have grown tired gazing at my pencil and paper. Here it is that I sit day after day, week after week, and eagerly receive my bit of an unleavened heaven.