

# L'Après Midi d'une . . .

By Allyn Wood

A picnic was spread on the bank and they surrounded it in positions of spiritual abandon. One, a long and somewhat undulant girl, lay among them gazing into the river that rolled peacefully yet dense with clay after the spring flood. The opposite bank, mysterious as an arabesque, hid in its shadow-work of trees the lives that, like theirs, had moved back from afternoon; lives bound to the waterway by probing beak and wading leg, by a diet of fish or of insects whose larval time is passed in mud and water. Look closely! implied the arabesque: a leaf may become a bird.

"Remember this—?" "Remember that—?" cried the picnickers. Their laughter almost equalled the rapids of the river. A little wind arose, rippling water-willow, then their hair. It rippled across the ground, over the new gress, and incense rose, mingled warm and cool like toast and water, and a hush came down, so that everyone realized simultaneously that until now the world had not been silent. The wind swept across the picnic things fluttering white petals of lotus. The others looked skyward, frowning, but the girl drew her eyes from the river to her companion saying, with a drowsy smile,

"I am turning into a salamander."

Now they knew it would happen. For some, the delicious mock-horror of waiting, of looking up with muscles tensed to fly; for others the picnic to save, a skirmish of eating and packing into baskets suddenly too small; pressing the deluge to their hearts before its coming; lifting their hands to feel for the drop so long so soon in dropping. Across the river moved a shadow turning gold to clay; a cloud scudded before the sun; and the rain began, Pluto Neptune Syrnix plop, Pluto Neptune Syrnix plop; the river became a galaxy of spheres.

They fled in groups, stumbling with their baskets into shelter of woods. The girl heard them and how the rain followed as a panic of pagan hoofs. But she was alone now: they supposed that she had come with them. She crouched under a great sagittate leaf which she had not seen before, that looked like arrowhead. In the deluge the trees rose immense in blowing slanting lines, and pebbles were strangely magnified. Her skin drank the air. Its coolness sloughed down an unusually long spine, spreading to softly wrinkled, ruffled sides. She crept from under the leaf on hands and knees, and her body slid like jelly over the stones.

One fleet misgiving dissolved unworded. She gave herself to the water and sank to its floor. The ruffles on her sides began rhythmically to wave; silt rose and subsided under her chin. The sideward lapping of river brought all knowledge, and so she began to doze. She dozed a shallow, animal dream of Now, with open eyes, that went back indistinctly to beginnings; and because the current soothed her undiscarded gills, and because elliptical waves of tiny fish went by, excited by the great drops overhead—she was not hungry for them, having recently eaten—she fell into a deep sentience, almost asleep . . .

Suddenly the rain was over.

She waked. The inlet was illumined from above. She was hungry and looked about her, but fish would not suffice, nor any food in the dim searching of her mind. She wished to be elsewhere, out of silt; her hands and feet began to swim close to her sides, raising her to air, then onto shore, dragging an oar behind. She heard voices in the wood that partially satisfied her hunger. They approached through a brilliant fountain, calling her name—her name! (had she been sleeping?)—and broke forth golden from the dripping trees, bearing picnic baskets. They saw her crouching on the sand beside a little plant, with water sluicing down her hair and skirt—

“Why, where have you been?” they cried.

But when she tried to answer, she could not remember nor explain.