

# "Thou Shalt Not Kill—"

By James Oliver Curwood

IF I did not believe a tree had a soul I could not believe in a God. If someone convinced me that the life in a flower or the heart in a bird were not as important in the final analysis as these same things in my own body I would no longer have faith in a hereafter.

As I write, a bird is singing in a butter-nut tree outside my studio window. A high-holder is hammering at a stub across the river which embraces my workshop in a gleamy curve. Each time I leave my door I pass under a grape arbor, and in this an exquisite mourning-dove is nesting. Within my vision is an island, a smothering, verdant jungle of green, with a forest of overtopping willows extending their slender arms down to caress the water, so that behind them are hidden pools of coolness and shadow in which wild things love to play.

This is not in the wilderness. It is in the heart of a small city of fifteen thousand people, where I was born, where I have lived, and where I hope to die. When I am ready to enter this most glorious of adventures, the mystery and privilege of death, I shall need no greater comfort in the first abysmal moments of its presence than these things—the grass, the flowers, the beautiful dove on her nest, the voice of birds, the rippling song of water, the inspiration and courage of the trees.

I am not writing an article on religion; but for me, Nature is closeness to God and I must go on thinking of it as such, and express myself according to my convictions. For me a tree stands not only for a tree but as a symbol of immortality. It is more than symbolic. It is proof. I believe that God is mightier than humanity has ever conceived Him to be, yet I think He is "a common sort of fellow," and I write these words with all the reverence of which the soul is capable.

I do not mean to imply that I think this Great Force is in my form, or in any particular form that I can imagine. But it is Life. It controls universes and billions of worlds. And the intention of this Force, this Master, this Mystery which we, on our fly-speck of an earth, call God, is that every living thing worthy of life be a part of Him, no one more important than the other, all equally necessary in a vast scheme which our

puny minds cannot begin to encompass, all serving their purpose, all certain of their rewards if the kindergartens of experience, possibly embracing aeons of centuries, have been employed to advantage.

I am almost Indian in this faith, and should be, because my great-grandmother was a Mohawk.

I have ceased to be a destroyer, as I once destroyed, and my ruling passion is to help wild things to live, from flowers

person not quite properly balanced. I cause I say that where there is individual whose instincts lead him into the woods and fields to torture and destroy, there are fifty men, women, and children who want to go into those woods and fields to look and listen and feel, I am accounted by some as a progressive factor in conservation.

Because I believe that life is life, no matter what form its habitation may be, and that the most inexcusable of sins is the taking of life beyond the point Nature has proscribed as necessary, I have found myself facing a mountain of opposition.

**J**AMES OLIVER CURWOOD is dead. One of the most popular fiction writers of his generation, one of the most ardent and courageous lovers of outdoor life, he leaves millions of devoted admirers to mourn him.

Only a month before his death, Mr. Curwood sent me this telegram:

*"Am working on an article for you which I have wanted to write for five years, and think is the best thing I have ever done. Shall have copy ready to mail you within week. Good wishes."*

But it was nearly a fortnight before the article reached us, for the author was already in the primary stage of his fatal malady.

Almost at the opening of this, his last article, Mr. Curwood wrote:

When I am ready to enter this most glorious of adventures, the mystery and privilege of death, I shall need no greater comfort in the first abysmal moments of its presence than these things—the grass, the flowers, the beautiful dove on her nest, the voice of birds, the rippling song of water, the inspiration and courage of the trees.

Before that message could be put into type the hand that had written it lay in eternal rest.

These pages hold Mr. Curwood's final plea for the conservation of our wild life, a movement in which he was a veritable crusader. He hated "game hogs" with an undying hatred, because he loved Nature with an undying love. Here you will find, simply and sincerely expressed, his creed of the wild.

THE EDITOR.

and trees and birds and beasts to man himself, rather than to indulge further in the dominant sport of my species—extermination.

Because of this, as chairman of the Game, Fish and Wild Life Committee of the State of Michigan, I am not held in high repute by a certain predatory animal commonly known as the game hog. My desire to keep wild life from the point of extinction has made a multitude of killers call me a fanatic. Because I say we should spend as much money in the development and preservation of our forests as we do in the building and care of our roads, I am regarded by some state legislators as a

it is called murder, and we are hanged and go to hell. But if our Government tells us it is proper to kill a thousand men, we kill them and are called heroes—and a chosen place is kept for us in heaven. Our conceit blinds us to fact.

I believe that Christ was the greatest lover of nature that history has known. He was the greatest of conservationists. In his work he pointed out God through printed words but through the nature that was about him. The Book of God, as he taught it, was clearly intelligible to every race. It was made of mountains, the plains, the vastness and glories of the heavens; of trees and flowering bush, of flowers underfoot, of

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swelling their throats in song, of rivers whispering in the sunshine; it was written in the flash of lightning, in the rumble of thunder, in the crash of landslide, in the destruction of earthquake; its beauty and its majesty and its tragedy intermingled; it revealed death with life, happiness with sorrow, growing things with dying ones. Nature was Christ's God, and Christ's God was Nature. The two were one and inseparable, just as the two are one and inseparable now.

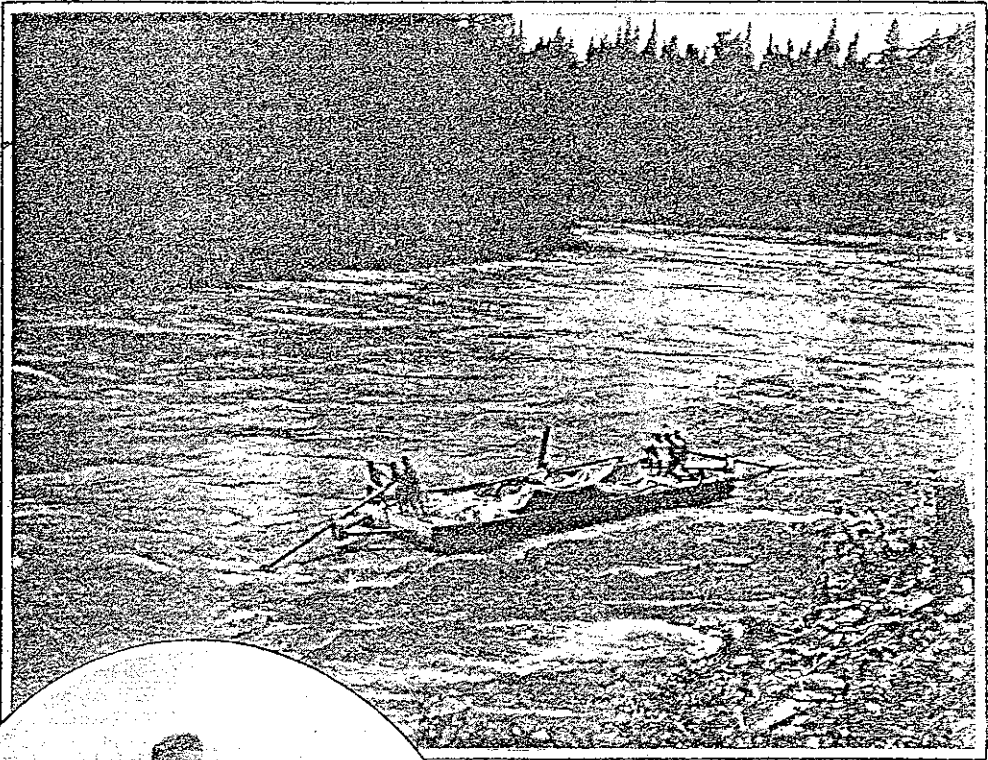
NATURE speaks to every heart in the same language. It is not Catholic nor is it Protestant. It does not belong to the High, Low, Broad, or Free Church. It does not lean to Romanism or Protestantism any more than it does to Mohammedanism, Calvinism, or the doctrines of the Latter-Day Saints.

God made the earth. He made it for man. Everything for man. Nothing else counts.

I cannot believe that Christ would say that, because each thought in His mind was toward conservation.

Nor do I believe He would say, "Thou shalt not kill." Instead, I think He would say, "Thou shalt not kill—except when it is necessary that thou shalt kill."

This brings us to one of the most important problems about which men and women can think. This problem involves a question which the human mind, and especially

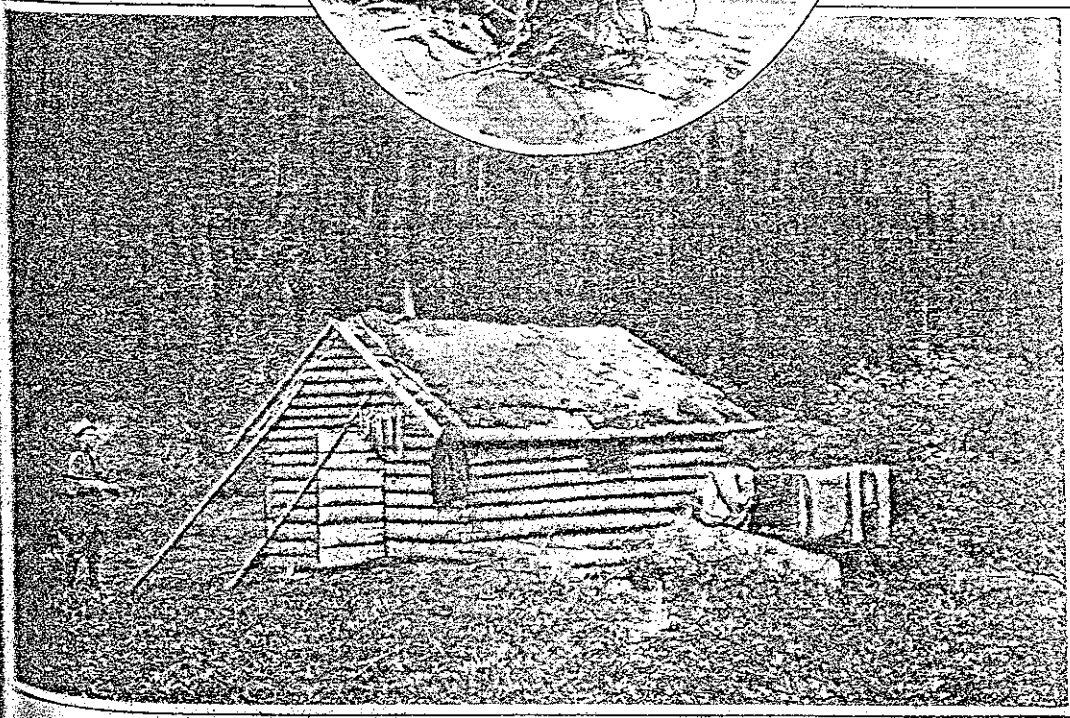


(Above) The Curwood outfit going down the Fraser River. (In oval) A recent picture of Mr. Curwood. (At bottom of page) Curwood before the cabin which he built in the British Columbia Mountains, and in which he wrote "God's Country" and "The Trail to Happiness"

the Caucasian part of it, has grown too self-important to ask itself, much less to answer. Just where does necessity end and wanton cruelty begin, in the instinct to kill? For ourselves we have invented the word "conservation;" but when we speak it or hear it we have only a rather hazy idea of the out-of-doors, the woods, the streams, wild life—and over this rides the predominant idea of slaughter, the elemental passion which has always inspired the animal called man to rend and tear the flesh of other living creatures, and call it *healthful fun*.

BEHIND this terrific thought, which, given its fullest freedom, develops into a degenerative mania, there is the vitally important kernel of reason, of cause, and of the necessity to kill. It is by the exaggerated use of this fundamental law of nature, the law which tells us that to fight and to kill are requisites to progress; that we have given to death its unwholesome and frightening aspect.

Death, instead of rousing our horror when it comes to ourselves, should be regarded as the most beautiful of all things. There are just two events over  
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# "Thou Shalt Not Kill—"

(Continued from page 15)

which we have no control; we cannot keep ourselves from being born, we cannot keep ourselves from dying. The short space between these two epochal dramas in a human life, or in any life, is the period given to us for our schooling. Death is the more glorious of the two adventures because it marks our graduation from the training-school to something higher—if we have carried on in a decent way. And I believe that this holds true for a bird or a dog, a flower or a tree, as surely as it does for a man.

Death was not meant to be unbeautiful. For living things to fight for themselves and against others was the first law of the foundation upon which the great Creative Force planned and built the universes. Progress, development of character and soul, vision, thought, everything that is significant in life come only through the vanquishment of obstacles placed before us. To survive, we must struggle; to grow, we must win. Shelter a flower too much, and it dies easily; pamper a child, shield him from the influences with which normal children have to contend, and he does not become a worthwhile man; let a man retire at the age of fifty, do nothing, fight for or against nothing except time, and he degenerates physically and mentally; let a nation surround itself with too much power and luxury, too much wealth, so that it no longer has to compete for healthful existence, and that nation declines in the pages of history.

NATURE, which is the visible manifestation of the Great Creative Force, never intended that anything should just die. Its intention was that everything should die straining to preserve life to the last. It meant everything should be killed, else in time progression would cease. A thing which did not have the inclination and courage to exert itself even when such effort seemed unnecessary was not living up to the mark set for it. So no single thing was given life, from the gnat and the vine and the beast to man, which did not have its annoyances and its enemies. This far-seeing Force made everything a pest and a menace to something else; it created an earth populated with combative forces; it allowed no pleasure which did not demand its price; it built life in a million different forms, each form having its own burdens to bear—which answers the question asked by so many children: "Why did God make mosquitoes?"

Proof of this intention is about us in nature. Nothing "just dies." Everything is killed. If this were not so, life would be everlasting, and the countless generations of unborn things destined to have their turn on earth would have no chance. The man who enters the apparently gentle and peaceful sleep of death at the age of ninety was killed as surely as the child crushed under the wheels of a train. He was killed by what



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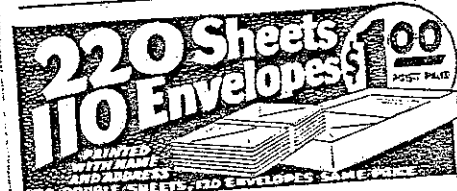
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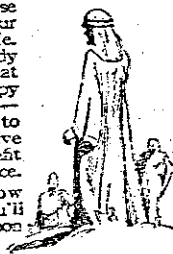
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alive, killed by the forces which were planted in us when we were born. The grass root is killed. The tree is killed, if not by fire or ax then by wind or lightning, or, in old age, by rot at its heart. It is this endless struggle against death which makes plants and flowers strong, as it makes men and animals strong. The blade of grass fights as hard for its existence as man does for his success.

As long as a proper balance is preserved, this destruction of one form of life by another, this continuous progress because of continuous conflict, is just and right and, in my opinion, was so planned by the Force we call God.

But when this balance is destroyed, when one species becomes so aggressive and powerful that it is a menace to all other species, then the inhabitants of the earth face the most serious problem of their existence.

**I**N THE beginning it was not ordained that all forms of life should be of the same degree of intelligence. I believe that a million years from now, if the human race is permitted to exist that long, man's intelligence will be as superior to the intelligence of man to-day as ours is superior to that of the toad in its puddle. And during those years the toad will have climbed several rungs up the ladder. Yet, even then, we shall only be creeping out of the sloughs of ignorance, compared with the accumulative mental forces which have progressed ahead of us to a point where they can help in the running of the universes.

In so far as we can look back through the few years of our known past, man has fought and killed to attain his present position on the earth. He killed to feed and protect himself for so many ages that in time killing became the chief passion of his life. The running of red blood has given him his greatest thrill and pleasure. Wars and internecine strife were not sufficient to quench his thirst during his early history. The blood-lust called for the frequent sacrifice of girls and young men chosen from among the families of his friends and neighbors. When he "got religion" he wanted to kill off the people of other religions, and set out valiantly to do it. In the name of God he slaughtered his way through two thousand years. But he burned and massacred his way up through all obstacles; more merciless than the tiger, less charitable than the serpent, bent on extermination and outrage and the despoliation of all living creatures, except those of the tribe to which he belonged. Then came so-called civilization, the dollar, and to-day.

Civilized men, as we know ourselves and our neighbors, are held in leash by laws, without which they would revert into the conditions which involved humanity centuries ago. There are few of us who have voluntarily made laws for ourselves; our neighbors have usually made them for us. It has always been difficult for us to perceive the moles in our own eyes and quite fortunate that our neighbors have been able to see the defects which the majority of them have not discovered in themselves. Through this rather paradoxical process, we have climbed gradually toward better things; a finer quality has been given to our emotions, our sentiments have been

sharpened, our instincts improved. We have come to understand a little of what charity and good will on earth were intended to mean.

But the most difficult of man's struggles has been the one to liberate himself from the lust to kill, which for so many thousands of years was the active and vital factor in his efforts not only to survive but to climb over other forms of life to the present status of his ascendancy. Therefore, conceding his own weakness, and confessing his inability to progress without the assistance of forces stronger than his individual will, he began to make laws for his neighbors and his neighbors began to make laws for him, with the result that to-day he is a law-directed and law-leashed animal, one half of him creeping while the other half condemns, never unanimous with himself—the savage opposing restraint, the better side of him making that restraint possible.

From the time when he could not out and kill his enemies indiscriminately, winning prestige and glory thereby, he began to seek out outlets by which he could relieve himself of his desires. It was then that hunting, as we know it, ceased to be a labor devoted to the quest for food and became a sport.

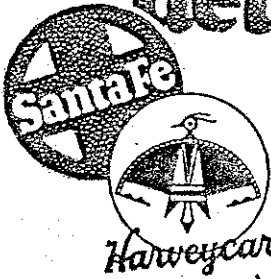
Not long ago, the so-called outdoors man could find no beauty in the woods, no thrill in the forests, no lure in adventures in the open, unless he could go into the places and slaughter some form of wild life. To kill had always been, and remained, his chief passion. If he had shot his last shell and the gun on his shoulder was empty, the day ceased to hold its interest for him.

**WE ARE** just passing over the border-land of this dark-age barbarism and are beginning the great work which we know as conservation—a work which embodies, first of all, the psychology of association of man with the desire to kill and the campaign which must be conducted to bring that desire to an end. Within the next few years it is bound to be recognized as the most vital problem in our existence, for so overwhelming is man's power become, so easy is it for him to exterminate entire species and forms of life, and so terribly has he already upset nature's balance that, unless he halts immediately, ruin and desolation lie ahead of him.

Conservation is no longer a term associated only with the killer. Heretofore the conservation departments of various states have exerted all their efforts, in the matter of wild life, that the killers might be given more to kill. It is largely the fact even now, that Michigan is among the first half-dozen most progressive states in conservation yet when any form of wild life is discussed on our commission it is the killer that receives ninety-nine per cent of all consideration. What will the fishermen do of certain action? How will the hunters take it?

These are the questions always asked and it is quite the usual thing to be run accordingly. We do not say, "There are fifty men, women, and children who want to go out and look at living things; one who wants to kill; therefore we interest ourselves at least partly for the majority." Not only in Michigan but

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cease to be the butcher shops which they now are, propagating only for slaughter, run always for the man who wants to kill, and always for that group which makes the loudest noise and apparently has the largest number of votes, irrespective of what is fundamentally right or wrong.

Not until this time, when man ceases to get his only perspective of wild life over the end of a gun barrel, will we recover what once we possessed, and now have lost. Then we shall have better fishing and hunting than we ever have had, and will indulge in those recreations like sportsmen and gentlemen, conceding that as our own intelligence and destructive capacities increase we must take less and less advantage of wild life, unlike so many of the present-day barbarians, who measure their gratification only by the quantity they slaughter, and not by the cleanness and beauty of the environment into which their quests have led them.

**WHAT** I intend to emphasize is that the destruction of wild creatures by man has ceased to be a necessity. He has grown beyond that. Other fields to conquer are offered him, wider fields, filled with the promise of greater adventure than he has ever experienced. He has space to triumph over, other worlds with which to become acquainted; he has the problems of life and death to solve.

Even the heavens are not too far away for him to begin to question. To the man in the cottage, as well as the man in the palace, modern life has given a thousand thrills to replace the thrill of killing, and both have reached a point where more good can come to them through watching wild life and its struggles to survive than through destroying it.

But man will go on killing. He must go on killing for a time. Savagery is still so closely a part of him that to divorce this passion from his soul all at once might bring calamity. He must actually see something die to be satisfied; and it is a theory, even preached in some of our churches and schools, that if we give him enough wild life to kill he will be restrained from killing his own kind.

That he must look upon some creature in the agonies of death to have his appetite appeased is proved in many ways by the highest types of our so-called "sportsmen" of to-day. An expert angler will say the greatest of all recreations is the playing of a trout, and that the adventure is over when the fish is in the creel. Yet he will not cast with a barbless hook and let the trout live after it has been conquered. A bird-dog man will maintain it is not the game he gets but the working of his dog that gives him pleasure. Yet he will not carry a stick on his shoulder in place of a gun loaded with powder and shot.

Man either lies to apologize for his wantonness, or he is so submerged in his egoism that he unconsciously thinks of God as a trickster and a mountebank, who created all other forms of life to be played with and tortured by him.

A break is coming in this wall of man's exaggerated opinion of himself. It was started by the killers themselves. A few years ago there was no limit to what one might slaughter in the woods and on

Then came the day when the slaughterers realized they must give wild life a certain amount of protection, or there would be nothing left to kill. Fishing clubs and hunting organizations came into existence. They multiplied and now there are two thousand Izaak Walton chapters and more than ten thousand hunting clubs in the United States. Fifty years ago there was not a conservation department in any state in the Union. The trained forester was unknown in the year I was born, 1872, such terms as forestry, reforestation, forest fire prevention, and forest research were never found in the newspapers. Our timber resources were so great that people believed they would last forever.

Since then we have established well equipped schools of forestry in twenty colleges and universities. We have thirty-three states with forestry departments. Every state has its department of conservation. Our national forests, set aside for all time, equal the combined areas of New England, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, and New Jersey. Our states also are acquiring vast areas of public forests. Newspapers and magazines are devoting hundreds of thousands of columns to further the work of conservation, where five decades ago the word was unknown in their offices.

A work which was started on a basis of personal selfishness and whose Golden Rule was "Save something to-day that we may kill to-morrow" has developed into a greater thing. Slowly a new birth to a sentiment of "Let live."

It is laying a foundation for a different religion and a different code of life. It is starting boys and girls out with broader and more healthful visions. In my own boyhood, I had a fine collection of bird eggs and another of birds' wings. A dozen of my boy friends had the same.

To-day such things do not happen. Our boys, when they grow up, will not be the slaughterers their fathers are. These lads and the girls who will be their wives will bring about real conservation in the coming generation.

**IT IS** this "younger set" that has already begun to give conservation its first constructive force. The old-fashioned hunters, who are the killers, are being thrust into the background by vibrant youth which is wiser than its fathers ever were, and which has done more to blacken the good right eye of egoism during the past ten years than any other influence humanity has known.

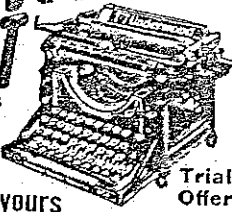
The day is not far distant when the entire upper half of the state of Michigan will be an almost limitless Yellowstone Park, which will call unnumbered millions of tourists into its fastnesses, and it is the younger generation which sees this possibility, and is working to make it a reality, while the Old Guard—that horde of killers who believe conservation was invented for their pleasure alone—are struggling to keep wild life at the ragged edge of extinction.

At the present time, in the north state, this Old Guard is making an effort to legalize the most barbarous of the devices man has invented for the slaughter of fish life—the spear. No more devastating influence has been known than this

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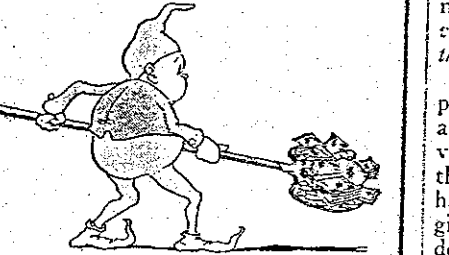


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This Old Guard in Michigan—controlling the state legislature, just as the killers seems to control all state legislatures—fights to the last ditch against every progressive piece of legislation if it conflicts in any way with the Old Guard's personal pleasure and freedom in going out to kill.

If a bag limit is to be decreased, the politicians must first count the noses of those who are to be affected; if a license fee is to be increased that better conservation service may be rendered, the politicians must put their ears to the ground, and learn how the despoilers view the matter. A real protest from the Old Guard nearly always gets results, and this Old Guard would rather see the last pair of grouse shot than to close the season on them.

THAT legislation is not more constructive is not entirely the fault of the personnel of the legislature. It is the fault of the people who elect their representatives. At least fifty men, women, and children do not destroy wild life to one who does, and conservation should be more largely for these fifty than for the one. Yet the fifty, up to this time, have taken almost no active part in the matters of conservation so vital to themselves, while the one who is a killer has been exceedingly busy.

The progress we have made during the past few years has been the result of a slow awakening, and credit must be given to the fishing clubs and sportsmen's organizations which have made campaigns to bring into their associations women and children as well as men, and non-killers as well as killers.

Within the next half decade I expect to see progress made in conservation as important as that which has been achieved in air travel during a similar number of years, for when people realize that forests and streams and wild life are the greatest assets given to this earth, and that their own welfare rests not in destroying but in conserving wholeheartedly, and in harvesting with discretion, not only Michigan's state legislature but all legislatures will be compelled to bury their prejudices and, still "with their ears to the ground," will act for the multitudes and not for the few. *But the voice of the multitudes must be heard before this can happen.*

Women will eventually be the most powerful influence in this rehabilitation and glorifying of the out-of-doors. Their voice and their ballot can return to us the unpolluted lakes and streams we once had; they can reestablish our forests, give us back the wild life which we have destroyed. When that day of earthly restoration arrives, we will have ceased to think in terms of slaughter; millions of men and women, instead of thousands, will go into the wilds to refresh their bodies and rest their minds, and they will not carry guns.

We shall then, perhaps, learn the truth, that without wild life there can be no forests, that without forests there can be no wild life—and that, should wild life and forest life reach a certain state of degeneracy, human life itself would cease to exist.

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the greatest gifts to man, and it is there, if one is sick in body or soul, that one should seek. Whether it is a mile or a thousand miles from a city makes little difference. Nature is the universal law. It is everywhere. It is neither mystery nor mysterious. Its pages are open, its life is vibrant with the yearning to be understood. The one miracle is for man to bring himself out of the clouds of his egoism and replace his passion for destruction with the desire to understand. I want to close with a story which I have told before.

I HAVE a very dear friend, a newspaper man, whose wife died. I don't know that I ever saw a man more utterly broken up, for his love for her was more than love. It was worship. He grew faded and thin, and a gray patch over his temple turned white. The efforts of his friends could do nothing. He wanted to be alone, alone in his home, where he could grieve himself to death. I knew that his case was harder because he was merely tolerant of religion. One day the idea came to me that resulted in his spiritual and physical salvation. I took him in my auto and we went out into the country four or five miles, opened a gate, drove down a long lane, and stopped at the edge of a forty-acre wood.

"Fred, I am going to show you a wonderful city," I said. "Come with me—quietly."

We climbed over the fence. I led him to the heart of the wood, and there we sat with our backs to a log.

"Now, just humor me; be very still," I said. "Don't move, don't speak—just listen."

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, that wonderful time of a summer day when Nature seems to rouse herself from midday slumber to fill the world with her rustling life.

"This is one of the most inspiring cities in the world," I whispered. "And there are hundreds and thousands of such cities, some of them within the reach of everyone."

The musical ripple of a creek came to our ears. And then, slowly at first, there came upon my friend the wonder of it all. He understood—at last. About us the air seemed filled with the whispers of a strange and wonderful life. Over our heads we heard a grating sound. It was a squirrel gnawing through the shell of a last autumn's nut. On an old stub, a woodpecker hammered. Close about us were the "cheep, cheep, cheep" and "twit, twit, twit" of little brown brushbirds. A warbler burst suddenly into a glorious snatch of song. A quarter of a mile away a crow cawed, and between us and the crow we heard a fox-squirrel barking, and, a little later, saw it, and its mate, scrambling in play up and down the trees. My friend caught my arm and pointed. He was becoming interested. What he saw was a fat young woodchuck passing near us on a foraging expedition to a neighboring clover field.

For an hour we did not move. Through all that city was the drone and hum of life, and that life was a song which soothed one almost to sleep. When, at last, my friend whispered again, "It sounds as though everything is falling." I knew the spirit of the thing was here. Then I drew his attention to a colony of big black ants whose fortress was the log against which we were resting. They were working. Two of them were trying to drag a dead caterpillar over my friend's knee.

When we rose to go I led him past a swale in which a score of blackbirds had bred their young. On a slender willow a bobolink was singing. A lead turtle lumbered back into the water and the bright eyes of green-headed frogs stared at us from patches of lily pads. Under a bush, a score of mice were teaching their tiny youngsters to work. When my friend saw the little fellows clinging to their mothers' backs, he laughed—the first time in many months.

When we went back to the car, I said: "You have seen just one tiny fraction of what nature holds for you and every other man and woman. You haven't believed in God very strongly. But you've got to now. That's God that's there in the wood."

THAT was four years ago. Today my friend not only lives in the heart of nature, but he has risen to the managing editorship of a metropolitan daily. He has only his summer vacation in which to get out into the big woods, but he has made room for nature all about him. From early spring until late autumn he front and back yards fairly burst with life. And they are not, like most yards, merely for show and passing pleasure to the eyes. He has brought himself down out of the clouds of man's egoism, and a learning and taking strength from nature, which he now worships as the great "I am." He has developed a hobby for interbreeding plants, as he calls it, and especially gladioli.

Each morning in spring and summer and autumn he goes out into his garden, and from the thousand living things there he receives strength for his nerve-racking duties of the day; and at night, after his task is done, he returns to his garden to seek that peace which is the great and vibrant force of the life that is there. During the months of winter, he has his conservatory. And for more than thirty years this man hardly knew whether an oak grew from an acorn or a seed.

Yet he has one regret: More than once he has said to me, with that great smile which will never quite die out, "If we had only found these things before, she would be with me now. I am convinced of it. It was this strength I needed to keep her from fading away and to build her up into joyous life again. Sometimes I wonder why the Great Power that is above did not let her live to go into the wood with us that day."

NEXT MONTH Albert Edward Wiggam hits another bull's-eye with his "Five Rules for Rational Living." Life is such a complex affair these days that anyone who can simplify and rationalize it so as to allow us to get more real "living" out of it is doing an inestimable service. And this article does that very thing.