

NATURES CHORUS

By Alice Whitson Norton

SOMEWHERE in the space of every passing day, there should be-there must be-there is-a moment that stands out as one for rejuvenation of the soul, uplifting of the mind, and sweetening of the spirit.

To some it comes with the glorious fulness of the midday sun. To some it comes when the sun stains the west with all the colors of the rainbow and turns drifting clouds into magic ships and fantastic figures. Some find peace and quietude for their souls in the silver mist that comes with dusk when nature is settling down for its nightly rest and the woods are sweet with bird lullabies.

Each of these hours carries a weight of peace, beauty, and spiritual helpfulness-but to me, the matchless hour of the full twenty-four is that unspeakable, unexplainable period that comes with approaching daybreak when nature's celestial chorus fills the air.

When I was a small child, it was my good fortune to live in a home where early rising was necessary.

The morning choruses loosed by the invisible singers of the higher strata awakened early in me a maddening desire to know them intimately. To do this meant hours in the woods after the close of day or before dawn. I chose the latter.

Getting out of bed along with the family at three o'clock in the morning, I formed the habit of going to the spring for fresh water for breakfast. Growing up, surrounded by tall timber and high hills, I had no fear of the darkness-I loved it.

During the darkest hours of the night I learned the difference between the call of an owl, blue heron, wild ducks, and moving caravans of wild geese. These birds, I discovered, sent out their plaintive calls from sunset to sunrise, some seeking food, some companionship, some merely idling away some wakeful hour. A mockingbird singing from the topmost bough of a tall hackberry in the light of a full moon is like a stringed orchestra playing a symphony, instrument by instrument. And yet these heavenly voices pale into insignificance compared to the chorus that precedes the dawn.

THE first time I heard the chorus that precedes the daybreak and recognized it as something vastly different from all the other bird choruses I had ever heard, was on a glorious autumn morning when I had risen on the stroke of three to go fishing with my father.

Because we both loved to walk together, and maybe because the path leading from our house to the river two miles distant ran beneath the tallest trees in the vicinity, up the highest hill, and out across a broad, fertile plateau close to the skies before it dipped down to the river again, we always walked.

At the old rail fence atop the hill where I had often listened to the voices of the night, my father halted.

"Listen, my child," he said softly. "The winged symphony is forming."

That expression from my father brought us closer together than all the years of our living together before had done. Somehow it had never occurred to me that my father was acquainted with this celestial choir that came just before the break of day. I had forgotten-nay, not even remembered-that he had been moving before the dawn through a cycle of years, and that his business took him into the dense forests in the valley and on the high hills about our cabin home.

I suddenly understood many things about my father that had puzzled me heretofore. Eagerly I crept into the circle of his good right arm, and there we waited breathlessly for-what?

Suddenly from the misty stillness of a marshy pool in the meadow came the voice of the redwing blackbird. "O-gl-ee ... o-gl-ee!"

From a dew-kissed clover field a meadow lark lifted a song. The voice of a field sparrow followed. An upland plover came in with his eerie whistle. Then suddenly I realized these were not solitary voices but groups of voices rising and falling in matchless unity to the magic baton of a matchless director.

"Did we hear the first notes, Father?" I asked softly.

"No," he answered. "The first notes probably sounded miles to the east, miles beyond our earshot. But we received the full significance of it as it rolled over us, and the echo of that chorus will live forever in our hearts."

I knew he had spoken truthfully. No one, having ever heard the dawn chorus, will ever forget it.

The suddenness of its beginning, the powerful force of it in the middle, and the sudden ending leaves one breathless in the great silence that follows.

The only strain of music I've ever heard that might be classed even as a faint echo of the dawn carol is the evening serenade often performed without rhyme, reason, or word in the extreme southern states where the Negro cotton pickers still gather around their small cabins after the long day is finished in the fields and begin singing.

One voice starts a melody in high soprano; others pick it up in alto, bass, and tenor, with strange, weird notes, high and fine, mournful as the gray dove, sweet as the upland plover. Like the dawn chorus, the symphony of Negro voices will

rise, swell, and sink into oblivion, leaving the listener pondering in his soul at the beauty of the wordless song.

Whatever your favorite hour of the day may be, hold to it with a reverence. But for an unexplainable, soul-stirring thrill, make it your business to climb to the top of a high hill some summer morning before day breaks, watch the rosy fingers of dawn fling back the curtains of the morning along the eastern border, and listen to nature's ethereal chorus pass by.

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