

Curwood James Oliver

God's Country; The Trail to Happiness



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James Oliver Curwood

God's Country; The Trail to Happiness

The First Trail

MY SECRET OF HAPPINESS

To-night I am in a little cabin in the heart of a great wilderness. Outside it is dark. I can hear the wind sighing in the thick spruce tops. I hear the laughter of a stream out of which I took my supper of trout. The People of the Night are awake, for a little while ago I heard a wolf howl, and, not far away, in an old stub, lives an owl that hoots at the light in my window. I think it's going to storm. There is a heaviness in the air, and, in the drowse of it, the sweetness of distant rain.

I am strangely contented as I start the writing of this strangest of all the things I have written. I had never thought to give voice to the things that I am about to put on paper; yet have I dreamed that every soul in the world might know of them. But the task has seemed too great for me, and I have kept them within myself, expecting them to live and die there.

I am contented on this black night, with its promise of storm,

for many reasons – though I am in the heart of a peopleless forest fifteen hundred miles from my city home. In the first place, I have built, with my own hands, this cabin that shelters me. My palms are still blistered by the helve of the ax. I am the architect of the fireplace of stone and mud in which a small fire burns for cheer, though it is late spring, with summer in the breath of the forests. I have made the chair in which I sit and the table on which I write, and the builder of a marble palace could take no greater pleasure in his achievement than have I.

I am contented because, just now, I have the strange conviction that, in this wild and peopleless place, I am very close to that which many peoples have sought through many ages and have not found.

In the distance, I can hear thunder, and a flash of lightning illumines my window. A cry of a loon comes with the flash. It is strange; it is weird – and wonderful. And also, in a way, it has just occurred to me that it is a fitting kind of night to begin that which I have been asked to write. For this night, for a short space, will be like the great world at large – a world that is rocking in the throes of a mighty tumult – a tumult of unrest, of discontent, of mad strivings, of despair, and lack of faith – a world that is rushing blindfold into unknown things, that is seeking rest and peace, yet can never find them.

It is, I repeat, a strange night to begin the writing of that which I have been asked to write, and yet I do not think that I would have the night changed. It seems to picture to me more vividly

the unrest of the world fifteen hundred miles away – and fifteen thousand miles away. I seem to see with clearer vision what has happened during the past two years – the mad questing of a thousand million people for a spiritual thing which they cannot find. I see, from this vantage-point of the deep forest, a world torn by five hundred schisms and religions, and I see not one religion that fills the soul with faith and confidence. I see the multitudes of the earth reaching up their arms and crying for the Great Mystery of life to be solved. Questions that are racking the earth come to me in the whisperings of the approaching storm. Can the ghosts of the dead return? Can the spirits of the departed commune with the living? Is the world on the edge of an inundation of spiritualism? Does the salvation of humanity lie there – or there – or there? What shall I believe? What *can* I believe?

The rain is beginning to beat on the roof of my cabin and, in number, the drops of the rain remind me of the millions and the tens of millions of restless men and women who are reading avidly, in the pages of magazines and books, the “experiences” of those who are giving voice to new creeds and new beliefs or reviving old ones long lost in the dust of forgotten ages.

Ghosts have been revived; spirits are on the move again. New generations are drinking in with wonder and suspense the whole bagful of tricks worn out ten thousand generations ago. Tomorrow it may be the revival of witchcraft. And the next day new prophets may arise and new religions take the place of the

old. For so travel the minds of men; and so they have traveled for hundreds of thousands of years before Christ was born and Christianity was known; and so they will go on seeking until God is found in a form so simple and intimate that all humanity will at last understand.

The storm has broken. It is like a deluge over the cabin. The thunder and crash of it is in the spruce tops – and such is the dreadfulness of the tumult and the aloneness of the place that I am in, that I would cease where I am did I think that anything I am about to say might be sacrilege. But when a mind gives expression to that which it holds as truth, there cannot be sacrilege.

I have been asked to put on paper something of that religion which I have discovered for myself in nature. There are many who will laugh; there are many who will disbelieve, for it will be impossible for me to make myself entirely clear in such a matter as this. For I have found what, to me, is God; and I cannot expect to startle the world, even if I desired to do so, for what I have found has been found in a very simple way – without bringing spirits back from the dead, or hearing voices out of tombs, or gathering faith through the inspiration of mediums.

I have found the heart of nature. I believe that its doors have opened to me, and that I have learned much of its language. Through adventure and bloodshed I have come to a great understanding; and understanding has brought me health and faith and a joy in life. And because these things will do the

world no harm, and may do some good, I am undertaking to write the story of a great and inclusive God whom men and women and little children should be made to know, but to whom, unfortunately, the swift pace of the times has made most of us strangers.

I fear that I am going to shock many people, and so I am of a mind to get the shock over with and come to the meat of what I have to say. But I shall start with something which those who read this must concede – that everyone in the world seems to be looking for something which will bring him more comfort and more happiness from life. That, I think, is the reason the Catholic Church is the only Church which is growing to any extent. It is growing because it is the only Church which is holding out its arms as a mother and giving a human being a breast upon which to lay his head when he is in trouble. Yet I am not a Catholic. Neither am I a Protestant. I do not belong to the High, Low, Broad, or Free Church. I do not confess to Romanism, Popery, or Protestantism any more than I do to Mohammedanism, Calvinism, or the doctrines of the Latter-Day Saints. I am not a sectarian any more than I am a Shaker or a Restitutionist. I do not believe that one necessarily goes to hell because he does not accept Christ as the Son of God. I believe that Christ was a good man and a great teacher of his times, just as there have been other good men and great teachers in their times. I can look upon the Mussulman at prayer, or the Parsee at his devotion, or the Eskimo calling upon his unseen spirits with

the same feeling of brotherhood and understanding that I can see a congregation of Baptists or Methodists singing their praise to the God on high. I do not pity or condemn the African savage and the Indian of the Great Barrens because they see their God through another vision than that of the Christian. There were many roads that led to old Rome. And there are many roads, no matter how twisted and dark they seem to us, that lead to the better after-life.

I wish that some mighty power would rise that could show to man how little and how insignificant he is. Only therein, I think, could the thorns and brambles be taken out of that path to peace and contentment which he would like to find, and would find if he were not blinded by his own importance. He is the supreme egoist and monopolist. His conceit and self-sufficiency are at times almost blasphemous. He is the human peacock, puffed up, inflated, flushed in the conviction *that everything in the universe was made for him*. He looks down in supercilious lordship on all other life in creation. He goes out and murders millions of his kind with his scientific inventions; yet he calls a tiger bad and a pest because the tiger occasionally kills the two-legged thing that hunts it. If he kills a man illegally, it is called murder, and he is hanged and goes to hell. If his government tells him it is proper to kill a thousand men, he kills them, and is called a hero – and a chosen place is kept waiting for him in heaven. His conceit blinds him to fact. He thinks our little earth was the chosen creation of the Supreme Power – forgetting that the earth is but a fly-

speck compared with the other worlds in space. He thinks that Christ was born a long time ago, and that time began with our own knowledge of history – when, as a matter of fact, he has no reason for disbelieving that man lived and died hundreds of thousands of years ago, and that countless religions have come and gone in the eons of the past. He does not stop to reason that, in number, he is as a drop in the ocean compared with other beating hearts on earth.

To me, every heart that beats is a spark from the breath of God. I believe that the warm and beating heart in the breast of a singing robin is as precious to the Creator of things as the heart of a man counting money. I believe that a vital spark exists in every blade of grass and in every leaf of the trees. It is the great law of existence that life must destroy in order to live, and when destruction is inevitable and necessary, it ceases to be a misdemeanor. But to let live, when it is not necessary to destroy, is a beautiful thing to consider.

Before men find a satisfying faith and peace, they must come to see their own littleness. They must discover that they are not *alone* in a partnership with God, but that all manifestation of life, whether in tree or flower or flesh and blood, is a spark loaned for a space by that Supreme Power toward which we all, in our individual ways, are groping. There is one teacher very close to us, as close to the poor as to the rich, to show us this littleness and make us understand. That teacher is nature – and, in my understanding of things, all nature is rest and peace. I believe

that nature is the Great Doctor, and, if given the chance, can cure more ills and fill more empty souls than all the physicians and preachers of the earth. I have had people say to me that my creed is a beautiful one for a person as fortunately situated as myself, but that it is impossible for the great multitudes to go out and find nature as I have found it. To these people, I say that one need not make a two-thousand-mile trip along the Arctic coast and live with the Eskimo to find nature. After all, it is our nerves that kill us in the long run, our over-restless minds, our worrying, questing brains. And nature whispers its great peace to these things even in the rustling leaves of a corn field – if one will only get acquainted with that nature. And my desire – my ambition – the great goal I wish to achieve in my writings is to take my readers with me into the heart of this nature. I love it, and I feel that they must love it – if I can only get the two acquainted.

“Fine line of talk for a man whose home is filled from cellar to garret with mounted heads and furs,” I hear some of my good friends say.

Quite true, too. It is hard for one to confess oneself a murderer, and it is still harder to explain one’s regeneration. Yet, to be genuine, I must at least make the confession, though it is less the fact of murder than the fact of regeneration that I have the inclination to emphasize, now that I have the opportunity. There was a time when I took pride in the wideness and diversity of my killings. I was a destroyer of life. Now I am only glad that these killings ultimately brought me to a discovery which is the finest

thing I have to contemplate through the rest of my existence.

In my home are twenty-seven guns, and all of them have been used. Many of the stocks are scarred with tiny notches whereby I kept track of my "kills." With them, I have left red trails to Hudson's Bay, to the Barren Lands, to the country of the Athabasca and the Great Bear, to the Arctic Ocean, to the Yukon and Alaska, and throughout British Columbia. This is not intended as a pæan of triumph. It is a fact which I wish had never existed. And yet it may be that my love of nature and the wild things, at the last, is greater because of those reckless years of killing. I am inclined to believe so. In my pantheistic heart, the mounted heads in my home are no longer crowned with the grandeur of trophies, but rather with the nobility of martyrs. I love them. I commune with them. I am no longer their enemy, and I warm myself with the belief that they know I am fighting for them now.

In this religion of the open, I have come to understand and gather peace from the whispering voices and even the silence of all God-loving things. I have learned to love trees, and there are times when I put my hands on them because I love them, and rest my head against them because they are comrades and their comradeship and their might give me courage. There is a gnarled old cripple of an oak in the yard of my Michigan home, a broken and twisted dwarf which many people have told me to destroy. But that tree and I have "talked over" many things together; it has pointed out to me how to stand up under adversity, has shown me

how to put up a man's fight. For, eaten to the heart, a deformity among its kind, each spring and summer saw it making its valiant struggle to "do its best." It was then I became its friend, gave it a helping hand, stopped its decay and death, and each season now the old oak is stronger, and often I go out and sit with my back against it, and I hear and understand its voice, and I know that it is a great friend that will never do me wrong.

It is thus that this religion of mine finds its strength from the sources of great and unknown power. But before it comes in all its peace and joy, man must bring down his head from out of the clouds of egoism, and say, "The oak is as great as I – perhaps greater."

Not long ago, it seemed to me that my world had gone dark and that it would never grow completely light again. In perhaps the darkest hour, I flung myself down upon the ground close to the bank of a stream. And then, close over my head – so close I could have tossed a pebble to it – a warbler near burst its little throat in song. And the miracle of it was that it was a dark and sunless day. But the warbler sang, and then he chirped in the boughs above; and when I looked at the ground beside me again, I saw there, peeping up at me out of the grass, a single violet. And the bird and the violet gave me more courage and cleared my world for me more than all the human friends who had told me they were sorry. The violet said, "I am still here; you will never lose me," and the little warbler said, "I will always sing – through all the years you live." And stronger than ever came the

faith in me that these things were no more an accident of creation than man himself.

Once I saw this Great Doctor of mine a burning, vibrant force in a room of a crowded tenement, from the roof of which one could not see a blade of grass or a tree. In fact, that force filled three rooms, in which lived a man and woman and five children. I spent an hour in those rooms on a Sunday afternoon, and the experience of that hour in a hot and crowded tenement was a mightier sermon than was ever preached to me in the heart of a forest. At every window was a box in which green stuff was growing. There were flowers in pots. A pair of canary-birds looked down upon the smoky roofs of a great city and sang. What interested me most was two contrivances the man had made to force oats into swift germination and growth. In a week, he told me, the green sprout of an oat would be two inches long. Then I saw why they were grown. Several times while I was there would a dove come to a window and wait for a bit of the green. I could see they were different doves. They told me at least a dozen were accustomed to come in that way. They were the children's pets. A little baby in arms cooed at them and waved his arms in delight. I have seen many poor tenement families, but that, I think, was the only happy one. The singing of the birds, the coming of the doves, the growing of green things in their room were their inspiration, their hope, the promise of dreams that would some day come true. Nature had become their religion, and yet they did not know it as such. It was calling them out into the great

open spaces – and they were living in anticipation of that day when they would answer the call.

Because I have spent much of my time in adventuring in distant wildernesses, and exploring where other men have not gone, it has been accepted by many that my love for nature means a love for the distant and, for most people, the inaccessible wilds. It is true that in the vast and silent places one comes nearer, perhaps, to the deeper truths of life. Of the wild and its miracles I love to write, and when I come to that part of my story, I shall possibly be happiest. But I would be unfair to myself, and the religion of nature itself, if the great truth were not first emphasized that its treasures are to be possessed by mankind wherever one may turn – even in a prison cell. I was personally in touch with one remarkable instance of this in the Michigan State Penitentiary, at Jackson, where a canary-bird and a red geranium saved a man from madness and eventually gained him a pardon, sending him out into the world a living being with a new and better religion than he had ever dreamed of before.

But the open skies and the free air were intended from the beginning of things as 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. For nature is the universal law. It is everywhere. It is neither mystery nor mysterious. Its pages are open; its life is vibrant with the desire to be understood. The one miracle is for man to bring himself down out of the clouds of his egoism and replace his

passion for destruction with the desire to understand.

I have in mind a case in point.

I had a very dear friend, a newspaper man, whose wife had 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 mightiest efforts of his friends could do nothing. He wanted to be alone, alone in his home, where he could grieve himself to death by inches. 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, and I led him to the heart of the wood, and there we sat down, with our backs to a log.

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

It was three 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. The sun fell slantwise through the wood, and here and there, under the roofs of the trees, we could see golden pools and streams of it on the cool earth.

“This is one of the most wonderful cities in the world,” I whispered, “and there are hundreds and thousands of such cities, some of them within the reach of all.”

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, through all that forty acres of wood, the air seemed to whisper forth 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, with its mate, scrambling in play up and down the trees. My friend caught my arm and pointed. He was becoming interested, and 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, and through all that city was the drone and voice of life, and that life was a soft and wonderful song, soothing one almost to sleep. And when, at last, my friend whispered again, “It sounds as though everything is talking,” I knew that the spirit of the thing had got into him. Then I drew his attention to a colony of big black ants whose fortress was in 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 little swale in which a score of blackbirds had bred their young. On a slender willow, a bobolink was singing. A land-turtle lumbered back into the water, and the bright eyes of green-headed frogs stared at us from patches of scum. Under a bush, a score of toads were teaching their tiny youngsters to swim. 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 ten-thousandth 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 back there in the wood.”

That was four years ago. To-day, that man not only lives in the heart of nature but, from a special assignment man, he has risen to the managing editorship of a big 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, his front and back yard fairly burst with life. And it is 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 is 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 little conservatory. And this man – for more than thirty years – hardly knew whether an oak grew from an acorn or a seed!

Yet has he one great regret. And more than once he has said to me, with that grief in his voice 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 she needed to keep her from fading away – 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.”

Hours have passed since I first sat down to write these thoughts that were in my mind. The storm has passed, and, following it, there has come a marvelous silence. Both my door and window are open, and there is rare sweetness in the breath of the rain-washed air. I can hear the near-by trees dripping. The creek runs with a louder ripple. The moon is shimmering through the fleecy clouds that are racing south and east – toward my “civilized” home, fifteen hundred miles away. Over all this world of mine there is, just now, a vast and voiceless quiet. And if I were superstitious, or filled with the imagination of some of the prophets of old, I am sure I would hear a Voice speaking out of that mighty solitude, and it would say:

“O you mortal, blind – blind as the rocks which make up the

mountains!

“Blind as the trees which you think have neither ears nor eyes!

“Made to see, yet unseeing; making mystery out of that which was born with you; seeking – yet seeking afar for that which lies close at hand!

“You want peace. You go in quest of a Breast mightier than all life to rest thy tired head upon. And thy quest is like the drifting of a ship without a rudder at sea. For you think that the world is young because thou livest in it now – and it is old, so old that thousands and tens of thousands of peoples lived and died before Christ was born. You think that civilization has come to pass, and ‘civilization’ has died a thousand times under the dust of the ages. You believe you are treading the only path to God – yet have a million billion people died before you, unknowing the religions which you now know.

“O you mortals of to-day, you are small and near-sighted, and hard of hearing – even more than they who lived a million years before you, when the world was an hour or two younger than now!

“What are you? Proud of thy purse, vain of thy power, conceited in thy self-glorification – yet you seek a simple thing and cannot find it. You cannot find *rest*. You cannot find *faith*. You cannot find *understanding*. You cannot find that Breast mightier than all life upon which to rest thy head when the end comes and when you go to join those trillions who have gone before you.

“And, in your despair, you cry out that you know not which way to turn, that you seek in darkness, that the world is a wilderness of schisms and religions, and that you cannot tell which is the right and which is the wrong. For you know that worlds have lived and died through the eons of centuries before Christianity was born. And you are oppressed by doubt even as you grope!

“Yet you know deep in thy soul that the heavens were not an accident. You know that hundreds and thousands of worlds greater than thine own have traveled their paths in space for eternities. You know that the sun was set in the skies so long ago that all the people of the earth could not count the years of its life. And you know that a Great Hand placed it there. And that Hand, you say, was God.

“Yet you seek – and you seek – and you seek – and doubt everlastingly clouds thine eyes; and when darkness comes and you stand at the edge of the Great Beyond, you look back, and – lo! – the path you have traveled seems very short, and it is cluttered with brambles and thorns and the wreckage of shattered hopes and wasted years.

“And then you see the Light!

“And, as thy spirit departs, the mystery unveils – the answer comes.

“For that which you sought, you looked too far. Close under thy feet and close over thy head might you have found it!”

The Second Trail

I BECOME A KILLER

This morning is a glory of sunshine and peace after last night's rain. It seems inconceivable that the blue sky above the forest was filled a few hours ago with the crash of thunder and the blaze of lightning. I was up at dawn, wakened by a pair of red squirrels playing upon the roof of my cabin. Together we watched the sun rise, and after that they chattered about my open door while I prepared my breakfast. We are becoming great friends. One of them I have given the name of Nuts, and for no reason in the world unless it is because there are no nuts up here; and the other, the sleek, beautiful little female, I call Spoony because she looks at me so slyly, with her pretty head perked on one side, as if flirting with me.

It is only eight o'clock, yet we have been up nearly four hours. At the edge of the creek, less than a stone's throw from the cabin, I have built me a narrow table of smooth-hewn saplings between two old spruce trees, and this is my open-air studio when the weather is fine. Word of it has gone abroad, though I am many hundreds of miles from civilization. Many kinds of wild things have come to get acquainted with me, fascinated chiefly, I think, by the marvelous new language of my clicking typewriter. The welcome and friendship of these little wilderness-hearts are

growing nearer and more apparent to me every day; and with each day the Great Truth speaks to me even more clearly than the day before – that each of these beating hearts, like my own, is a part of that nature which I worship and is as vitally a spark of its life as the heart which is beating inside my own flannel shirt.

These friends of mine, gathering about me more intimately and in greater number with each passing day, are individuals to me because I have come to understand them and know their language. There is the Artful Dodger, for instance – I sometimes call him Bill Sykes or Captain Kidd – screaming close over my head this very moment. In very intimate moments I call him Arty, or Kid, or Bill. He is a big blue jay. In spite of all that has been said and written against him, I have a very brotherly affection for Bill. He is a man's man, among birds, notwithstanding that he occasionally breakfasts on the eggs of other birds, and kills more than is good for his reputation. Also, he is the greatest liar and the biggest fraud and the most brazen-faced cheat in the bird kingdom. But I know Bill intimately now, where I used to kill him as a pest, and I love him for all his sins.

He is a pirate who never loses his sense of humor. He is always raising a disturbance just for the excitement of it, and when he has drawn a crowd, so to speak, he will slip slyly away to some nearby vantage-point and laugh and chuckle over the rumpus he has raised. Right now, he is screaming himself hoarse forty feet above my head. Two others have joined him, and they are making such a bedlam of sound that Nuts and Spoony have

ceased their chattering. There! – I have fired a stick at them, and they are gone. They have had their joke, and are quite satisfied – for the present.

I can hear the musical rippling of the creek again, now that Bill and his blustering pals are gone, and my typewriter is like a tiny machine gun sending its clicking notes out into the still forest. A pair of moose-birds, almost as big as the jays, are hopping about, so near that, at times, they are perched on the end of my sapling table. They are the tamest birds in the wilderness, and within another day or so will be eating out of my hand. Unlike the jays, they make no disturbance. They are soft and quiet, never making a sound, and their big, beautiful eyes fairly pop with their intense interest in me. I like their company, because there is a philosophy about them. They never tire of looking at me, and studying me, and at times I have the very pleasant fancy that they are bursting with a desire to speak. They are very gentle, and never fight or scold or commit any sins that I know of; and just now, as the two look at me with their big soft eyes, I find myself wondering which of us is of most account in the final analysis of things.

Ten or fifteen rods above me, the creek widens and forms a wide pool overhung with trees, so that, in the hottest weather, it must be a delightfully refreshing place. I can see it plainly from where I am sitting, for the creek twists a little, so that it is running directly toward me when I look in that direction. Many wild things come to that pool. This morning, I found a bear-track there, and the fresh hoof-prints of a doe and fawn. Yesterday, a

pair of traveling otters discovered it, but when I tried them out with the voice of my typewriter, they turned back. I am confident they will return, and that we shall get acquainted.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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