FOUR IN THE OPEN—CHRONICLES OF A SUMMER HOLIDAY: BY VIVIAN BURNETT

The holiday was my holiday, such a holiday as a busy city man in summer manages, at times, to sandwich in between two weeks of labor in a superheated office—a poor, insignificant thing to be called a holiday, but nevertheless precious for the small relief it gives from the swelter, crash and bang of the business-mad marts. Yet they are not totally despicable, such holidays, for they have this virtue, that while they last they are holidays. Let them be longer, and the languor, the limb-stretching ease of it all disappears—the leisure becomes an accepted right, instead of a blessed privilege—the sense of holiday passes. The days of labor are forgotten, almost before the galls of the yoke have healed on the shoulder; the sense of respite goes; the habits fall into the ruts of laborless days, and the joy of respite vanishes. It seems to me that in the scheme of the rewarding world to some there should be some provision that the feeling of holiday—of labor rightly set aside—should never fade. If in heaven I am not to realize that I am holidaying from this vale of tears—then I shall want to go somewhere else.

And perhaps it would be into the Land of Childhood, for I think it is one of childhood’s most precious characteristics that its sense of holiday is perennial. Give a child the whole day to play, and it comes to you heavy-lidded at the twilight, begging that the bed hour be put off just another few minutes, for just another game. If the big children could only manage somehow not to forget the charm that makes play never-wearying—or could learn it again from childhood! I sometimes think—at times I firmly believe—they can learn at least the form, and absorb a bit of the spirit.

As I came down the stairs, just before breakfast, on this holiday of mine, and looked out of the open door, through which the moist morning breezes brought me the intoxicating fragrance of a hundred fresh country things, I saw little Narcissa, her arms ecstatically extended, her head thrown back and her eyes searching the blue sky above. She was singing, rhapsodizing, piping in her tender treble, a hymn to the morning all her own.

I like to drink the sunshine; I’m drinking air in, too—
Like earth drinks up the water, and grass drinks up the dew.
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In Narcissa’s song there was a note of the gladness of life; and I confess that the warmth of her morning greeting imparted some of the thrill to me.

“That’s a poem. I made it,” she cried, when she had a mouth free to speak with. “Do you like it?” I confessed I did, and following her precept and example, I stood with her hand in mine, drinking in life, and many emotions nameless because they are so fine, from the warm sun, the brisk morning breeze and the beautiful country, until the bell sounded us to breakfast.

Breakfast was set on the veranda. Jack, the thoroughest kind of a boy, came clattering down stairs, just as we were getting seated; and following Mary, the maid, as she came from the kitchen with a plate of rolls, was Minerva, nearly two years younger than Narcissa—which makes her about six.

It was at breakfast that I discovered that it was also their holiday, for they immediately began planning what I was to do.

“He’s going sailing with me,” was Jack’s declaration between two bites of toast. “He’s never been in the Bobbet, and I want to show him how I can sail.”

There is a lot of the man-to-be already showing in the boy Jack. There are no frills about him, and he possesses a certain intrepidity, combined with an ample measure of clear-sightedness and common-sense, that makes him perfectly safe to trust with himself. His fondness for the water amounts to love. When the littlest lad he could name and describe every separate rig of vessel, and the old fishermen of the village used to chuckle as they put him through his paces, naming the ropes and spars and tackle of a ship. In due time he developed the natural desire to sail his own craft, and his wise mother, on his tenth birthday, made him a present of a small dory, in the face of the fearsome criticism of all the neighbors.

Jack’s declaration was immediately followed by a protest from Narcissa. “Oh, Jacky, I wanted him to come into the woods with me, to the Dell, the one I’ve just discovered this summer.” And Minerva joined the clamor with, “He must see my flower-beds.”

In time to save three sets of feelings, Wise Mother made the discovery that the day would be long enough for the heart’s desire of all three children. She suggested that, as the tide was just floating
Jacky’s boat, and a good breeze was blowing, I should go with him first—which was agreed.

I don’t believe that a boy can be with the sea much and not get some of its breath and freshness and wholesomeness into him. Since Jack had owned his dory he had been running wild with the sea, drinking in the invigorating wind of it, and the unstinted sun of it had sunk deep into him. The mariner’s brown was already on his face and arms—not a skin tan, but something that might almost seem to be part of the flesh and blood. The Bobbet swung at anchor with some fifty yards of shallow water between it and shore, and it is ample indication of Jacky’s strength that he carried my 140 pounds pig-a-back from the dry sand to the boat.

Every rope lay properly coiled; every bit of brass shone spotlessly. Captain Jack was an orderly seaman, and a spry one. The mast was set, the sheets rove, the sail spread in a jiffy, and the little craft, taking the wind in her sail, careened gracefully, and shot ahead. With a conscious sense of captainship, Jack, who had relegated me distinctly to the role of passenger and ballast, sat at the tiller. The problem of sailing a boat was evidently one that gave his boyish soul the greatest joy. He watched the water ahead of us with eager eyes to detect dangerous catspaws of wind, then turned his attention to the sail to see if it were drawing full; next his eyes were on the sheet and tackles about the boat to be sure everything was fast, or taking in a buoy or chance boat that might be coming too dangerously near.

We sailed along for a time in silence, a silence one gets only on the water. Jack broke it at length by saying, “Don’t you like it—the way she bobs up and down—and the way the water slushes around her bows? It’s ’most the nicest sound I know.”

As we rounded a point, a small boat carrying a couple of young men crossed our path. “Shall we race ’em?” asked Jack, and almost before I could reply he had ordered “ready about,” I had shifted to the other side, the boom had swung over, and we were off after them.

CAPTAIN JACK was keener than ever. That boat had to be beaten. He trimmed the sail with the most precise care, set me on the forward seat because that brought the boat to her “best sailing lines”; he took advantage of each catspaw, and held the little craft to it, until the water lapped over her sides. Swiftly we
drew up to them, Jack’s excitement climbing higher and higher each minute, and mine after it, even though I was only passenger and ballast. Jack’s eager eye and tense, childish face amused me and delighted me; he was showing his real character stuff. Holding onto an unusually strong puff, while our adversaries timidly luffed, until the water was splashing aboard over the lee rail, the young captain shot his little ship ahead. We crossed their bows, and he waved a quietly derisive hand at them, and turned to me, crying out, “You see, the Bobbet can go.”

Having demonstrated the Bobbet’s ability, Captain Jack was willing to turn homeward. The wind had died down, and low down in the sky, big black clouds were piling themselves up. “We’ll have to shorten sail soon,” remarked the skipper, as he looked about. His skill in the lore of sea and sky told him that a storm was coming.

“Looks like a pretty bad one,” commented Jacky, as he set about making everything taut, and I began to be just a little bit dubious as to the wisdom of trusting myself out in a boat with so young a skipper, as I saw the dark streak, spotted with spume come rapidly toward us. But it didn’t daunt Jacky in the least. When the Bobbet felt the first puff he put her about, and in a few seconds, without shipping a pint of water, we were skimming along amid the white caps in perfect safety.

Jacky was enjoying it, and I began to. The clouds carried wind, but no rain, and in a few minutes the fury of the squall blew itself out. Then the youthful skipper of the Bobbet put her about again, and cleverly easing her to the still heavy wind, carried us scampering home, with a broad wake of foam behind us.

I was proud of young Captain Jack. The big sky, the free winds and the broad waters, it was borne in upon me, were proving exceedingly good teachers for him. He was learning what books can’t give a boy—self-dependence, resource, courage—these things, indeed, and besides, the frankness, simplicity, robustness and sincerity which are a part of the beauty and fineness of natural things.

When Jack, panting, let me down from his back upon the dry beach, Minerva stood ready to take possession of me.

“You have to plant lilies-of-the-valley where they can have lots of shade,” she imparted to me. “Gerangiums will grow anywhere, but I don’t think they are very pretty. Do you? Nashturshums make an awful pretty border, and they grow very fast.”
THE young horticulturist’s activities were ruled by her own sweet will, and the results were evident in two long plots, one by the side of the house, one by the back hedge, a crescent close by the pathway leading to the back door, and a circle in the center of the lawn. A small spade, a rake with some teeth out, a hoe and a trowel lay in a heap by the house. Scratches of the rake, and holes made by the hoe on each of the plots, as well as dead weeds, recently uprooted, showed me that the enthusiastic little gardener had been preparing for my visit.

She plumped down on her fat knees beside the crescent plot and continued her loving labor of weeding. She had produced flowers, with a delightful, childish irregularity; but she had satisfied her desire to make things grow, all in her own way. As long as the good earth harbored her seeds, coddled them and warmed them, and brought forth the flowers, it did not matter to her much where they appeared. So she had scattered seed and bulb indiscriminately, and they had flourished into a wild and charming garden.

As she knelt beside them, there was a little something in her attitude of the worshipper. Ever and again her snub nose poked itself into the calyx of a flower to revel in its odor, and in many a bloom that to my coarser nostrils held no fragrance she seemed to find a rare perfume. Her little fingers moved lovingly and tenderly around the stalks and roots of her blossoms, as if she feared she might hurt them.

She was knee-deep in blossoms, phlox, nasturtiums, geraniums, bachelor’s buttons, an olla podrida of color and bloom, and to my affectionate eyes she seemed a fragrant flower herself, a gigantic golden-headed blossom, the sweetest kind of flower the earth can boast.

“Now,” she said, turning around and surveying all the clumps of bloom that were rioting in the various beds, “I’d like to give you a flower.” She made her decision, but I could see that it was with a little regretful hesitation that she broke off a couple of pansies.

BEHIND me I heard the rhapsody of the morning. Narcissa was humming the tune, and I filled in the words, fastening their meaning to Minerva, in her tangle of flowers, to Narcissa herself, and to Jacky, too.

Narcissa slipped her soft little hand into mine, and leaned her chestnut head against my arm.
“It’s so cool and lovely in the woods at noon-time,” was the indirect way that she extended me her invitation to come with her.

“Where are we going?” I asked her, when she had led me out of the garden, and was heading me across some fields that, I confess, seemed to me, in the midday summer sun quite Sahara-like. Narcissa laughed. Her laugh is a soft contralto gurgle, an ineffably sweet extract of happiness. “On to my Dell, where dryads dwell,” she responded gaily. Narcissa, I believe, lives in the momentary expectation of having a faun or nymph or hamadryad step out before her from some tree. She is deeply learned in such things, and she reads much, especially in Lemprière’s Classical Dictionary, and puts me frequently to rout in discussions, through her knowledge of Olympian relationships and biographies.

We progressed across the field by a series of stoppages, for on our path was a stray, belated daisy to be gathered and placed in my button-hole, balancing the pansy; a wild strawberry vine to be plundered of its two wee fruits, of which the larger was forced upon me; a toad, sleeping lazily in the shadow of a weed, to be gently urged into jumping; an abandoned field-mouse’s nest to be pointed out as a marvel, and a host of other things, small but mightily important. We arrived at a barbed-wire fence and crawled through, and stood finally in the Promised Land of shade and coolness—Narcissa’s territory. The little wood was not large, but the trees in it were well grown—maples, birches, pines and a few oaks, with but little underbrush.

“Look! Such a soft carpet,” broke out Narcissa. “All grass and moss. I just love it under my feet. And I love the greenness—even the sunshine, when it comes through the leaves, rubs some of the green off. Don’t you think it is the nicest wood you ever knew? I like to make it as much like a maze as I can,” she explained, “so’s people can make believe they can’t find the way to my Dell, or away from it, without I show them.” Suddenly she stopped. “What is that?” she said. “What?” I queried. She turned a listening ear up toward the tree tops. “Wait!” she whispered, and then in a moment I heard the rippling call of a bird. “An oriole?” she questioned me. I blushed inwardly on admitting my ignorance, and excused myself by the fact that I was city-bred. “And can you tell all their songs?”

“But all. But lots—the thrush, the catbird, the vireo—I can’t think of many just now. But when I am in the Dell I like to lie on my back and look up and listen to all the birds’ songs.”
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BEFORE us, a half-dozen straight pines grouped themselves in a circle. Narcissa led me between the largest of them, saying it was the gateway, and we stood on a pine-needle strewn space. We were silent a moment to listen to the gurgle of the water as it wound its tortuous way between the rocks that barred its path.

"It's the coolest sound I know," broke in Narcissa. "I lie here on the nice smelly pine-needles, with the root of that big tree for a pillow and just listen and listen. And sometimes I think I hear voices in it calling to me as if I were a dryad. And one hot day I just slipped off all my clothes and played I was a nymph. It was ever so much fun, splashing about in the water."

And that is, according to my reasoning, why she is so invariably happy. Somehow, I explain it, she is aware of the real harmony of things; senses it with a finer nerve than most of us have; and sees no cause for anything but rejoicing. If there is a lesson in nature, or perhaps it is something too sublimated to be termed a lesson—she has unconsciously absorbed it into her childish soul, and it gives evidence of itself in her very definite beauties of mind and body.

"Would you like to see my Treasure House?" she said suddenly.

"Yes, indeed," I answered and followed her to a large tree before one of whose gnarled roots a sizeable stone was rolled. She pulled it away and disclosed a hole crowded with things.

The Treasure House contained just what I should expect Narcissa to treasure—pieces of bright-colored fungus, a huge pine cone of most perfectly tapering form, a couple of speckled blue eggs that, she hastened to assure me, were taken from an abandoned nest, several bright feathers dropped by birds in their flight, and a host of other things, whose beauty would be most evident to a child of the woods.

When all the treasures had been exhibited, admired and put away again, I went back to my tree. She came and laid her brown head upon my knee.

"Let's keep still; let's listen to the forest talk," she said, as we lapsed into a lazy silence. Then the chorus of the wood rose—the buzzing of it; the murmur and thrum of it; the leaves rustling, the branches softly scraping against one another, the boom of the flies, the only busy creatures near, the melodious, clear, thrilling call of the birds, and the occasional crackle of a twig or a rustle of dry leaves that betokened the cautious passing of a small animal.
AT LENGTH, being the heavier body, I fell to earth, and, prompted by an interior emotion quite common to me about one o’clock, I remarked, “We must not keep them waiting for lunch.”

Narcissa scrambled up, reluctantly. “Oh, it’s so lovely! I do so hate to leave it,” she said. And so did I.

The noonday meal ended with the inevitable question: “When can we go in bathing?” The tide was high early in the afternoon, but caution against cramps and other disorders required a small space of time to elapse between eating and entering the cold ocean. That period was worried through somehow, and we soon found ourselves splashing in the Bay. Jack could swim like a fish, and it did not matter to him whether he was above or below the water. Narcissa, the sprite, was just as well able to take care of herself. Minerva could make her pudgy legs and arms go fast enough to keep her above water for considerable time, and did not mind water over her head, so long as somebody, especially Jacky, was around.

When we had had enough of this we adjourned to the sand, where Minerva brought me snail shells and horse-shoe crabs and starfish, to tell me how wonderful they were. Narcissa robbed a near-by rock of its seaweed to make a wig for herself, and played sea-queen.

It was a full afternoon for all of us. There was an excursion to the town, the main object of which was the purchase of an ensign for the Bobbet, which I had promised her captain. Then we visited the fish-houses, where there was a hearty “Hello, Cap’n’” for Jack from every grizzled tar, and a fatherly smile of welcome for Narcissa and Minerva. Then there was some reading from their favorite book of fairy tales while we swung lazily in one hammock, and finally, toward the cool end of the afternoon, at Narcissa’s suggestion, we set off for the High Cliff. It was a long tramp, but Narcissa knew the most beautiful way round, and took us a circle through her beloved woods instead of by the dusty road.

The lengthening shadows gave warning that we must be returning. By another route, through the darkening and mysterious woods, still piloted by our woodswoman, we made our way homeward, happy, but tired and hungry. Our holiday in the open was over.
AND the point is this: that I wonder if a holiday would hold half as many joys to my dear little friends Jacky, Narcissa and Minerva if they were city-bred children instead of living all the year round in the country. Minerva has only a doll or so in her playroom—for use, I suspect, on rainy wintry days. More often her playthings are the flowers. As for Narcissa, I can see her as a pale city child, spending her time with her sensitive nose poked into books of romance, and from this, I opine, her living in the country has saved her—and would save many like her, who grow peaked and bent-shouldered for want of space to throw themselves about in. I am glad that the woods offer her a healthy outlet for her imagination, and that she has had opportunity to find out how much there is of real interest in the Book of the Outdoors. As for Jacky—he’s a great sailor, and I know the sea is helping make him the right kind of a straightforward man.

When the house was still, and I sat alone in the moonlight on the veranda, with my feet on the railing, watching the pale blue smoke of my cigar make a pattern against the dark blue of the sky, another thought came to me—that I had learned a great deal on this holiday. Three eager pairs of eyes, three quick, sensitive little minds had been lent me, and by grace of them I had seen many a beauty in this old world that I had, in natural process of living, grown blind or callous to—commonplaces, just the ordinary things that custom had staled, but things of a real beauty, nevertheless, that one ought not let escape him. The child sees the beauty of these minute perfections of Nature, as they dawn upon his fresh, impressionable consciousness—and I sometimes think that the greatest service of children lies in their bringing to us older ones, again and again, the news of the wonder of these commonplaces. They keep our eyes and our ears open, so that we shall not be among those that having eyes see not, and having ears hear not. They make us review again the finenesses of life.

For this service of go-between ’twixt us and the world, and Nature especially, it seems to me no child is so well fitted as the child that lives in the country, and drinks deeply of Nature from its first day.

And thus this story of a holiday seems to resolve itself into an argument that country life is best for a child; does it not? That is what I have meant to suggest, only I consider it not only the “best thing,” but an inalienable right.

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