

BROOK LORE

ESTHER CLARK WRIGHT

BLESSED be railroads and modern highways: they have given us back our brooks. In the leisurely days that were, when a road came to a brook, it was accustomed to turn from its course and follow the brook upstream for some distance until it found an easy crossing place, then cross on a few poles and planks, turn downstream again, and at length resume once more its general direction. You can see along our brook where the road did just that. Now the road is a trunk highway, hard-surfaced, also hard-boiled; it passed with its head in the air, not deigning to notice a mere brook, not deviating one hair's breadth from its appointed course. Underneath is a cement tunnel through which the waters of the brook may find their unregarded way, and above the tunnel earth and stones are heaped high to carry the highway, and the railroad, aloft. For the further protection of the brook, there are painted posts and stout wires at the edge of the road. These might call attention to the presence of the brook, were it not for the fact that the road is so designed that nobody need diminish in the least his speed of travel, and who can see a brook when he passes by at sixty miles an hour? Hurrah, the brook is ours.

Once upon a time, I heard a very excellent sermon on the "Process of Possession". Of the preacher's development of his theme, I remember little, only enough to enable me to lay claim to this brook. I have made it mine: I have lived beside it; I have followed its course from the cedar swamp where it is born to the last trickle over the stones along the river's brim; I have walked through the tunnel under the railroad and the highway; I have plunged among the alder bushes and wandered countless times through the maple grove; I have cleared the winter's accumulation from the falls and from the pool below; I have sat for hours in cool retreats and watched the water skippers play over the surface of the water; I have snowshoed by the brook in winter and slid down the steep drifts heaped beside it; I have seen it in early spring, when sap was running and fast-melting snows were making the brook charge furiously down the hillside; I have seen brook and banks red and gold with the falling leaves of autumn; I have watched its volume

lessen and lessen until only a small trickle remained, and rejoiced to hear its voice uplifted in thanks for a heavy rainfall.

It is just possible that the Jerseys think they own the brook. They certainly live beside it more continuously than I do, and they drink of it, which I would never dream of doing. Still, they have not penetrated to its source as I have done, for a fence keeps them to their own farm, and the source lies three farms over. Neither have they gone down the tunnel, although I have found them crowded at the upper entrance peering curiously down. A horrid thought comes, perhaps one did venture down: there was a head, and a leg... Whatever the Jerseys think about their possession of the brook and all that pertains thereto, they show no jealousy of me when I wander through their domain, neither the heifers in the lowest section, nor the milch cows nearest the barn, nor the expectant mothers in the upper pasture, at the edge of the woods, where Tom Peabody sings loudly. They always saunter over to look at me, and we talk together of how sweet the clover is and how pleasant the shade on a summer's day.

The year the barns were burned, two old sows were put out to pasture beside the brook until a place could be built for them. They loved it. They radiated contentment as they rooted around the old apple trees where extra feed was put for them. They used to run up to the bars and try to tell us how happy they were. Also enjoying themselves were several young cattle, who in the confusion of the time were thrust out in the pasture regardless of age and sex. I noticed some mild flirtation going on, but thought nothing more about it until the next summer, when I made enquiries about some under-sized cows in the stalls of the new barn. These had unexpectedly produced offspring a year before such things should be, and the farmer had been mystified at first, but then had remembered about the promiscuous pasturing. "And things are done you'd not believe"...

For a few years there were sheep also along the brook. One evening, at dusk, when we were sitting on the verandah of the camp beside the brook, we heard the sheep start to come down a path across the way, their footfalls distinct on the still night air. Somebody said, "Let's count them." One, two, three, four, five, six, passed down, but the sixth came reluctantly, turning back often and calling up stream. However, there was no response to her calls, and the six sheep settled down, under the shelter of a tree, we supposed. Then, far up the brook, a

high-pitched voice called tentatively, "Mama, mama." We could hear the lamb start down the path, pause, and call again, "Mama, mama". Then it seemed to turn back, but its voice had penetrated to the sheltered nook, downstream, and from there came a stern voice, "Baa, why didn't you come when I called you?" The little feet pattered on, and the little voice answered meekly, "I'm coming, mama". Mama continued to scold, but then the lamb reached the steep slope where a mis-step would plunge it into the brook (I have nearly slipped there, myself), and its voice rose higher and higher in panic. "Mama, mama, I'm afraid, it's so dark." The scolding stopped, and a calming note replaced it as the sheep hurried upstream: "All right, dear, steady, I'm coming to meet you." The panic died from the lamb's shrill voice, there was a last word of motherly counsel about coming in before dark, a murmur of contrition from the lamb, and once again all was quiet and serene, and only the murmur of the brook broke the stillness of the summer night.

There is a postscript to this story now. Once I told it to a tableful of girls at boarding-school. From all but two there was laughter, sufficient to bring a reproachful look from the headmistress. The two looked puzzled, and one asked, "What's funny about that?" There was another burst of laughter, after which I tried to explain that I was translating into Anglo-Saxon, into English, the language we use, what the sheep said. There was no lighting of the stolid countenance. "What language did the sheep speak?" she said. It was more than a reproachful look we had from the head after that.

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Travelling up brook is a very pleasant way of going on errands, but not to be recommended when time is a consideration. Sometimes, on the way for milk or berries, I allow myself one bit of the brook as a treat, perhaps the glen between the railroad embankment and the river, where the trees grow taller and taller as they strive towards the light. During spring freshets, the river comes far up this glen, and strange things happen. Trees are uprooted, gravel is deposited or flotsam and jetsam, sand bars are thrown up. Occasionally when the river has retreated, the brook has to make its way underneath these deposits and disappears from sight for a space. Once a sturgeon was left in the brook, unable to rejoin his kindred in the river because of one of these bars. His pool grew smaller and smaller, and he looked more and more unhappy as he thrashed around its

narrowing confines in unavailing search for a way out, or lay there morosely awaiting an untimely end. Finally, somebody took pity on him, scooped him up in a pail, which he did not like, and restored him to the river.

A butternut tree or two grow beside the brook, and there is always a race between the squirrels and ourselves to see who gets the butternuts first. Once we won, or thought we did, but we left the pail of butternuts at the back of the camp while we were eating dinner on the front verandah. When we went out to the kitchen for the pudding, there were barely half-a-dozen butternuts left in the pail, and a cheeky squirrel scolded us vigorously for interfering with his taking those. Another time, we put a pail of butternuts on the verandah floor beside us, with a wash-basin over it, and dared the squirrels to come. They did, with a wary eye on us.

There are ferns in the glen, and trilliums, and the largest jacks that ever held forth from green pulpits. There is a huge boulder, unlike the indigenous rocks, a relic, so a geologist told us, of the glacial age. The brook tumbles along, not over any special falls, but in little leaps and jumps, with pleasant murmurings that seem to fill the night air with a sound of many voices in soft communion. On the railroad embankment above the tunnel are raspberry bushes, quantities of them, but hard to reach. In the deep pool at the foot of the tunnel Jack swears there is a trout, a large trout, but I have not seen him, and Jack has not caught him, therefore will I not commit myself to any definite statement regarding his existence.

Above the tunnel, in the domain of the Jerseys, the brook is a never-failing storehouse of delights. It turns sharp corners and sweeps around generous curves; it hurls itself over daring precipices and dives into the midst of spruce and cedar thickets; it hurries past steep slopes and caresses grassy banks. Oftentimes there are scars which show where the brook has torn away the banks in the fury of its springtime madness. From the tunnel to the top of the maple grove the brook is at its maddest, its gayest, its loveliest.

How far is it from the tunnel to the top of the maple grove? Thank heaven, it is not a distance to be measured with a speedometer or with a stop watch. Time is not along the brook. There is many a large, smooth rock, cool in the shade of overhanging trees, where one may sit for hours and watch the play of sunbeams between the water and the alder bush above, and listen to the harmonies of the brook's orchestra. Or one may lie upon the grassy level, that marks the line of the old road, and look down

the slope to the windings of the brook below, and admire the flecks of light and shade, and marvel at the new growth of the trees around, until a flicker wonders audibly from the elm tree overhead what you are doing there, and a songsparrow twitters anxiously from the birch behind that he wishes he knew indeed, and a goldfinch and his mate carry a family quarrel into and out of the tall spruce at the edge of the road, and a junco sheers off in fright at finding you are not part of the landscape after all.

The paths in the pasture are many, high on the slope, low down, in between, crossing the brook, going through the clumps of trees and around them. It is also possible to scramble along the bed of the brook, where the hazard of slipping on a mossy rock and being precipitated into the water gives a certain zest to the expedition. Running shoes, sneakers we used to call them, are the best footwear for that journey, unless the explorer's own soles are sufficiently toughened to serve. Going by that route guarantees that none of the falls will be missed, the lower ones over which an alder has sent a protecting arm, the middle falls by the sugar camp with the large rock pools where skippers dent the surface lightly, and the upper falls in the maple grove across which used to lean a slender maple whose leaves reddened long before autumn came.

For some years the Jerseys were kept away from the sugar camp and the falls and the tree-shaded banks of the brook nearby. Defended from these long, curling tongues, the little maple and beech seedlings grew and flourished exceedingly, but now the heifers have been allowed in the enclosure once more, and it is a question whether the seventeen-year-old saplings are going to be able to hold their own against those hungry invaders. Every bush and tree has been stripped of leaves as high as the tongues can reach, and the bare stems remain, a forlorn and sorry sight.

A few yards above the sugar camp, a farm road crosses the brook on the remains of what was intended to be a dam. It never was a very successful dam, but it did for a few years hold back enough water to kill a maple tree on one side of the pond. In spring there is still a little pond, and in summer an area of swamp. Cat tails grow there, and a frog will stick his head out of the water and boom remarks at the passers by. In late June his remarks may have been protests at the way in which the pond was shrinking. The cows, who had come down the grove to wait near the gate for milking time, seemed quite unconcerned, but they have learned that the brook never wholly dries up in summer.

Is there anything lovelier than late afternoon sunlight slanting through maple trees? The maple grove is one of the most delaying features along the brook; the trees on the rocky hillside, the shade beneath them, the birds that fly among them have a never ending fascination. The farmer found one day a terrifying insect clamped to a maple tree, with a long steel drill inserted in the tree, and a large sac behind, from which he was emptying what of death and destruction into the tree? A shuddering visitor offered to take specimens into the entomological laboratory, and later reported, with vast relief, that the fearsome creature was a beneficent insect after all, whose eggs hatched and ate up the grubs within the tree. Now we look upon him proudly, and next April we shall drink his health in maple syrup.

Once past the maple grove, if one can get past the maple grove, and the cool, secluded nook at the foot of the steep slope which frightened the lamb, and the upper falls, and the wild strawberries on the grassy slope which was blue with violets in spring, and the hazel nuts along the fence,—if one can leave these delights, there is a very different section of the brook to explore. Above the place where the porcupine used to come shambling down in the early evening, there are swamps, both to the right and to the left, useful feeders for the brook. Here grow blue flags and tall grasses that fly long white banners: here would grow bog cranberries, somebody thought, but the Jerseys had other ideas. Here for some distance the brook flows smoothly through the grass over a sandy bed. Mostly it is a boisterous Canadian brook, tumbling over rocks and scurrying down the hillside, unlike its decorous English cousin that slips and slides, and glooms and glides, in nicely alliterative rhythm.

Most of the brooks that flow into this our river have long tales to tell of adventurous journeys through the woods, but our brook has a different story. It has come only through a swampy valley on the edge of the woods, winding and twisting among the alder bushes, sneaking under line fences, until it reaches the farm to which the Jerseys belong. Among the cedars it first gathers itself together, and the cedars it loves all the way throughout its course. Between two knolls covered with cedars it finds its outlet to the great river, whose greatness is due to the offerings of the countless little brooks it has been gathering in for hundreds of miles. Very shyly, amongst the water willows and the tall reeds, the meadow rue and the mint, the brook spreads its little all over the stones and unobtrusively loses itself in the broad bosom of the river.