

## The Beauties of America

Sigrid Undset sees in them promise  
of new life in a world torn by war.

By SIGRID UNDET

I HOPE my American friends will remember me when I am back home in Norway. I hope they will write me sometimes and tell me if the skunk cabbage bloomed early this year, or if the white violets still blanket the wet ground around Sunset Lake, and if the blue violets are plentiful along the old railroad tracks through Spring Wood up at Kenwood, and tell me of the mandrakes—for to have been granted the sight of the mandrake, the majestic leaves shading the glittering white flower, is a boon indeed.

And when Norwegian children have retrieved their right to roam their own country and play discoverers among its fields and brooks and in my native mountains, it will be a blessing to know how American children are also out to conquer for themselves the loveliness of their country. There is a promise of life and regeneration in this, in a world that is going to have a hard time clearing away the debris and building anew on the ruins left by years of war and destruction.

American children know a lot about nature—a knowledge compounded of city-bred grass and trees and creatures that thrive on cement sidewalks, sometimes picked up on a home farm or a summer camp. It is astonishing how much valuable information I am indebted to American

boys for. For instance, I know how to care for pet snakes, only I don't feel competent to follow the directions given me by that generous Berkshire boy who wanted to give me a small snake he had in a milk bottle. He had caught it in the family refrigerator, where it had been brought in with some vegetables. It was really a singularly attractive little creature. With the belly scales coral pink and the upper side burnished bronze, bright red eyes like rubies and delicately forked tongue, it looked almost like a piece of jewelry.

But when the would-be donor explained to me how I would have to feed it forcibly with tweezers for an indefinite period, as snakes in captivity usually go on a hunger strike, I felt I had better refuse his offer, with thanks. His name was Harvey and he had an immense experience with pet snakes, only he had recently switched over to keeping pigeons and he did not want to start over again with reptiles.

**W**HEN I proposed that he let the snake out of the bottle so it could run away and feed for itself, he seemed shocked. The groundhogs or the skunks would eat it. I did not know that the groundhogs eat snakes, but European hedgehogs do.

though I could not say if they are related to the groundhog. But I suppose Harvey was right.

Then there were the two small boys, squatting with hands on their knees, who looked up not unfriendly when I joined them to look at the object of their scrutiny—a praying mantis. And the older one, I would take him to be some 10 years old, observed in a grave small voice, "Better not touch him. It costs \$50 if you kill him. Because they eat the Japanese beetles."

**T**HE mantis evidently knew it. I saw quite a few of them in Brooklyn last fall, and wherever they chose to sit and rest—on a crowded pavement or in one of the tiny patches of front garden—they always seemed perfectly at their ease, never minding the onlookers they attracted. This one also ignored us. We agreed that he looked queer, with that long and thick body and huge hind legs, but a head not much larger than the buds on the dogwood tree. And yet he is not so terribly ugly either, because of the nice colors—brown, pale green and straw yellow. After a while the mantis strolled leisurely from the concrete walk onto the grass and disappeared. The boys straightened their backs and wiped their hands on the seats

of their pants, though it was not necessary. I suppose they did it just from habit.

"There is a rose garden over there," one of them volunteered. "We'll show you where it is, if you like to go there."

The rose garden in Brooklyn Botanical Gardens is very lovely, and there is a notice at the gate that children are not admitted unless accompanied by grown-ups. So I expressed my gratitude, thinking how very touching it was that these little boys wanted to go and look at the roses. The roses of October are lovelier than the summer roses. They bloom less profusely, but the colors are purer and the flowers more perfect of shape.

**T**HE youngsters, however, did not show any interest at all in the flowers. While we sauntered along the paths, they told me about some white mice that belonged to the brother of the smaller one. The brother's name was Tony, and they were very proud of him, although they did not explain why. They did not tell me their names, and, as I felt they would not like me to interrupt their talk, I never asked. They were very nice little boys. When we came to the gate leading into the pergola, they started running and in a moment were out of sight. People had started drifting toward the exits; closing time would be near.

The low, mellow sunshine made the faded brown and yellow of the trees glow brightly against the deepening blue of the sky. I do not know why it is that the trees in the city parks just fade in the fall. They never seem to take part in the riot of red and maroon and yellow and bronze that makes the end of summer here in the Eastern States of America so unbelievable—at least to foreigners from Europe.

I, for instance, cannot really recall the American autumns I have seen as anything real; I feel as if I had dreamed them. Yet even so, with the shadows gathering under the trees and lying in wait to flow out and swamp the well-kept beauty of the public gardens with dusk, one is carried away also here by that elusive feeling, common to parks all over the world at evening, as if the forests and the wildernesses of primeval times were whispering their greeting to the city people: We were here before you; we shall return some day when you have laid your own cities waste. The trees and the vines of the old woods will return and bury the ruins of all human habitations.

The murals of Edvard Munch in the Aula of the University of Oslo (where the Germans staged their "Reichstag" fire last November as a pretext for rounding up the Norwegian students for deportation to Germany) are justly considered one of the masterpieces of modern art. The panel called "Natural Sciences" shows a nursing mother, a young woman of the common people, sitting by the seashore surrounded by naked boys who are busily exploring the fascinating life that hides under boulders and seaweed on the sands. Somehow I always come to think of that picture when I go down to Washington. The train passes through a countryside that is not among the most beautiful in America, rather dreary except where the tracks run along the sea for a while.

**Y**ET to me there is something strangely appealing about the New Jersey marshes, with the sweep of the elevated concrete driveways low against a sky which is always hazy from the nearness of the ocean, and with small factories and hog farms and clusters of houses dumped at random here and (Continued on Page 38)

there on the wide, melancholy plain of sedge and bulrushes and stagnant water and running brooks and channels. A bit of primeval landscape which Americans could afford to let lie just outside one of the world's largest cities, to be settled haphazardly with lonely small housings all the way over to the dark and dingy walls of factories and groups of black smokestacks in Newark.

**W**HAT a world to explore for adventurous boys, if they want to, with plant and animal life in mudholes and water-courses, a fine place to reinvent natural sciences yourself. But it is the same all the way down. The unexciting farming country is so full of little ponds and ditches and small copses, and then there is the shore of the bay at Havre de Grace. Maybe it is only something I fancy, but I imagine this must be a landscape made for children to make discoveries in.

I have always wondered, when I traveled on trains here in America, why the natives scarcely ever look out of the windows at the country they pass through. They seem entirely engrossed in their magazines and books, or they go to sleep. Other visitors from Europe have made the same observation. Of course, we arrive here with the delusion that the whole of this continent is dotted with big cities and industrial plants and clustered with smokestacks, all of it tied up in highways where trucks and cars go by in an incessant stream as if on conveyor belts, and no trace of free nature anywhere.

American literature, what was known of it in Europe, may have had something to do with this notion. Up to recently the authors we read handled city life and social conditions, or they wrote about love or sex in a way that to us seemed utterly romantic or anti-romantic, but never very realistic. Only just before the outbreak of this war the books of Thomas Wolfe, Willa Cather (not translated into the Scandinavian languages until a short time ago), Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and some others made us aware that America is still a continent of waste or sparsely populated areas and of immense and varied natural beauty. The poems of Robert Frost, of course, bring New England home to your every senses, but he was far too little known among us, alas!

**N**ATURALLY, it is an error to suppose that Americans as a whole are unresponsive to the beauty of their land. Somehow people who love the same things will find each other. At least it has been my good luck here in this country to meet many men and women who know their countryside—the moods and temper of soil and sky, the wild life and the trees and vines and flowers they grew up with—as joyfully and intimately as I know the countryside around my home in Oslo and the environs of that small town in Denmark where I

used to go and visit my mother's family when I was a child.

For it seems to be the same all over the world: you have to rediscover the beginnings of natural sciences for yourself at an early age or else nothing you are taught in school or from books or from traveling and going on vacations as a grown-up will ever really become part of your vital knowledge—the knowledge about life that is as a marrow in the skeleton of your mind.



It is as true of little girls as of boys, though girls are usually more secretive about their adventures in this field; and naturally enough, since parents usually forbid girls to roam about on their own, especially near a city, and with good reason (and when people talk about the injustice of nature toward the female sex, this I think is the worst and most real). Girls also are usually more suspicious of grown-ups. They want them to admire their good looks and nice clothes and sweet ways, but they do not want them to know too much about what is going on in their minds.

**B**OYS very often want just this—they want to air whatever they have an idea about at any given moment. I do not imagine that those American boys who so generously shared with me their zoological and botanical lore took any special interest in me as a person in so far as they sensed I was the kind who would listen to them without interrupting or asking silly questions. Every time I think of those youngsters I marvel how much little boys always know of a lot of things, certainly a great deal that parents with a sense of responsibility would prefer them to be ignorant of. But it ought to be a consolation to their parents, if they are aware, how much sound and useful knowledge small boys always manage to pick up.

Certainly girls are just as open to the emotions of rapture and wonder and keen interest in the living things of the woods and meadows and marshes and the seashore as the boys. The women I have met over here who were eager to show me the loveliness of their country's nature had all of them childhood memories they treasured—memories of a place on a sunny hillside where the first tufts of green leaves sprouted from among the withered grass, of a tree near their first home that burst its buds earlier than all the others, of a spring where the sweet white violets used to grow, of a gully full first of hepaticas and afterward of trillium, where they went year after year to gather flowers.

One very sweet woman told me how her grandfather, who was a schoolmaster by profession and a geologist from love of his country, took her out with him when she was a little girl—and what a lucky little girl she was. It was the father of one of my girl friends who took his daughter and me out on Sundays and taught us almost all I know about the geology of Norway—and a lot more besides.