Animal Friends, Dependent and Free

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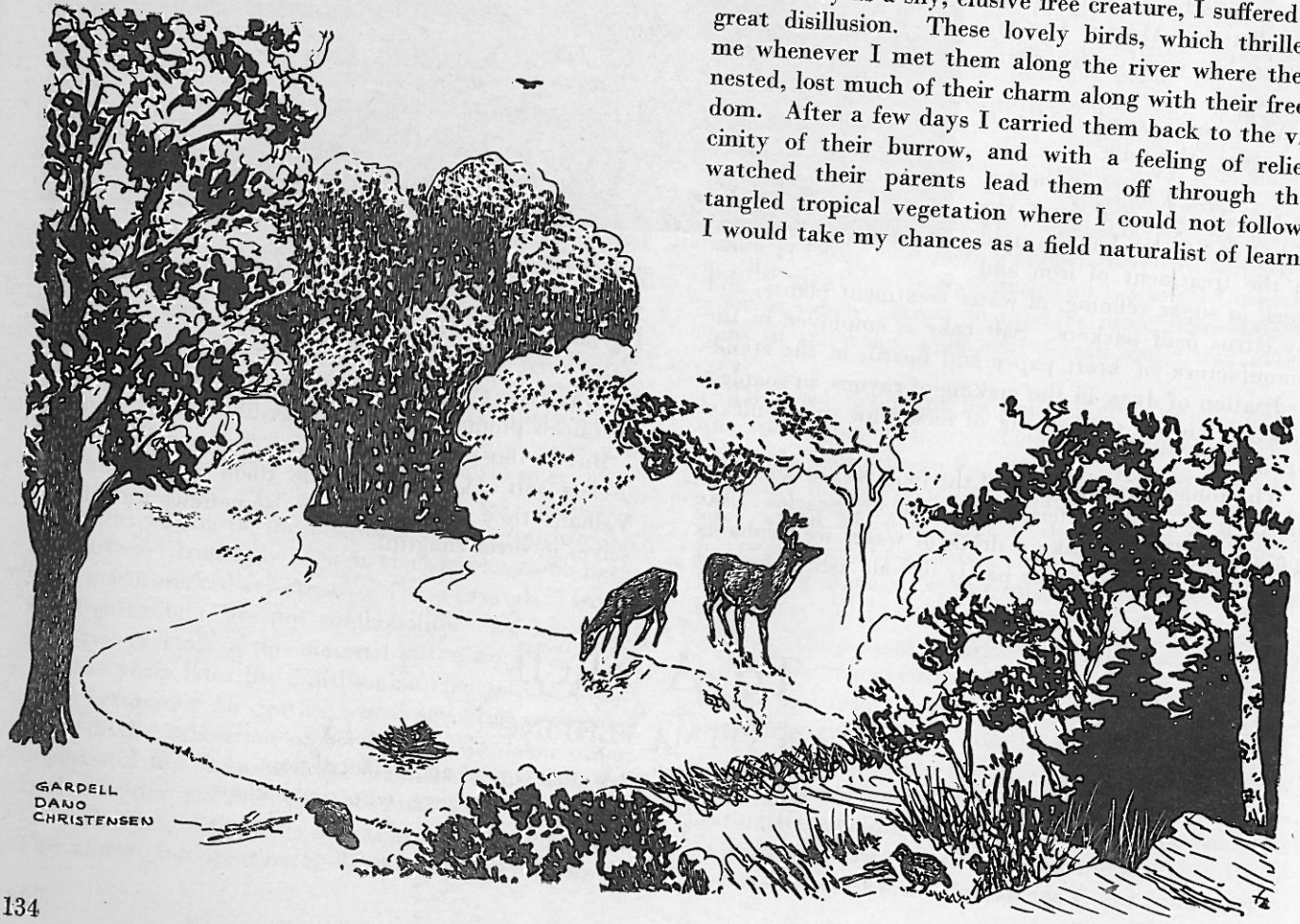
Illustrated by Gardell Dano Christensen

THE LITTLE child who is attracted by bright-eyed, winsome creatures in feathers or fur, can seldom live with them in the woodlands and meadows where they are at home. It is difficult for him to become friendly with them unless he keeps them as pets, to be loved and caressed, pampered and indulged, and all too often neglected, starved, and abused. As a child I, too, had a long procession of pets — dogs, chickens, pigeons, peacocks, ducklings, squirrels, a crow, a young whippoorwill, and more others than I can at the moment recall. Each was, for a while, in its master's eyes, the prettiest and most engaging creature on earth, the recipient of lavish attentions; some soon became a burden and a problem; most were mourned or regretted when they died or escaped; but the void left in the young heart by their passing was before long filled by an equally cherished successor.

As I grew up and extended my explorations farther and farther from the parental roof, the fascination of studying many forms of life in their natural surroundings quite displaced any desire to keep animals as captives or pets. Freedom had become a passion with me; I was impatient of all artificial or arbitrary restrictions upon my own liberty, and afflicted by the sight of any creature, of whatever kind, whose freedom had been curtailed. I held that an animal could be considered free only in that environment in which its structure and whole hereditary equipment of appetites and instincts fitted it to live, and I further believed that only beings that were perfectly free could teach us truths of great worth. Hence I avoided domestic and captive animals as unprofitable acquaintances.

The last time that I put a free creature in a cage was more than twenty years ago. I had been studying the habits of motmots and wished to follow the development of the racquet-shaped tail feathers of these beautiful tropical birds. This would require close and continuous observation; so from a nest I had been watching I retained two nestlings almost ready to fly, intending to release them after I had learned what it seemed important to know. But when I saw through the meshes of a cage a bird I had hitherto known only as a shy, elusive free creature, I suffered a great disillusion. These lovely birds, which thrilled me whenever I met them along the river where they nested, lost much of their charm along with their freedom. After a few days I carried them back to the vicinity of their burrow, and with a feeling of relief watched their parents lead them off through the tangled tropical vegetation where I could not follow. I would take my chances as a field naturalist of learn-



ing more about the motmots in their natural setting.

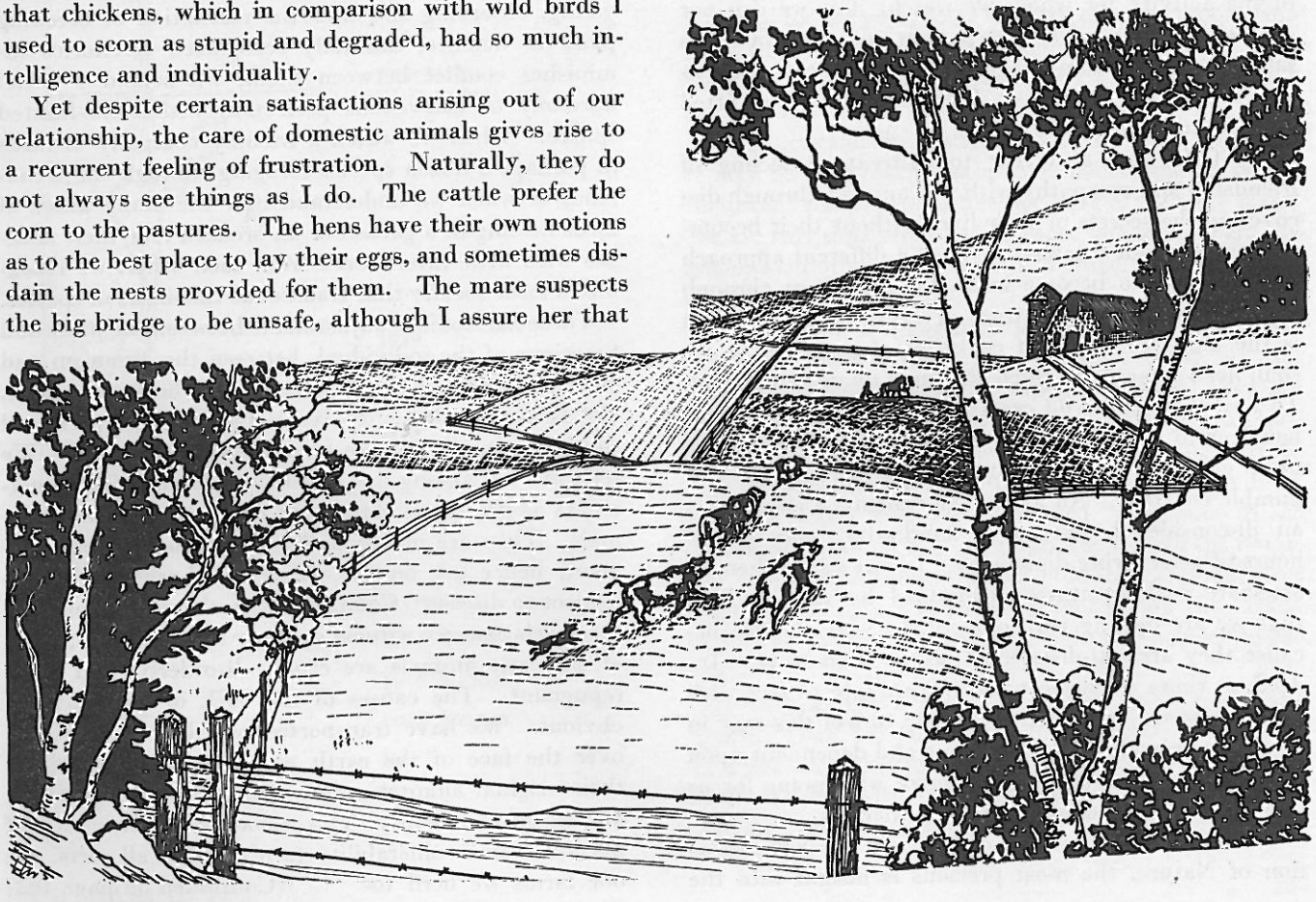
Not long after this, I accompanied a famous ornithologist, now dead, to visit an aviary well stocked with tropical birds. I knew many of these birds in their native habitats; some were elusive, and I welcomed the opportunity to observe them at closer range. But the effect of the aviary upon me was not quite as I had anticipated. I found the sight of the caged birds so distressing that I invented an excuse to escape before seeing all of them.

Although I have not again consigned any creature to captivity, nor kept any animal solely as a pet, I have through force of circumstances become the owner of a number of domestic animals. After I had settled on a backwoods farm, which, because of its isolation, had to be fairly self-sufficient, I found it necessary to acquire first horses, then a few cattle, and finally chickens. I did not wish to exploit these animals, but rather to go into partnership with them. I would give them food, shelter, medical attention when sick, in short treat them with kindness and consideration, as friends rather than as slaves. In return, they would provide me with transportation, traction, milk, or eggs. This seemed a fair exchange of services, from which both they and I would profit. To a certain extent, it has worked out as I had hoped. Aside from occasional illness, the farm animals seem content and even happy. They have on the whole paid for their keep, and I have grown attached to some because of their personal charm. Before I began to know them intimately, I never imagined that chickens, which in comparison with wild birds I used to scorn as stupid and degraded, had so much intelligence and individuality.

Yet despite certain satisfactions arising out of our relationship, the care of domestic animals gives rise to a recurrent feeling of frustration. Naturally, they do not always see things as I do. The cattle prefer the corn to the pastures. The hens have their own notions as to the best place to lay their eggs, and sometimes disdain the nests provided for them. The mare suspects the big bridge to be unsafe, although I assure her that it will bear us safely across the river. These conflicts of will make it necessary to drive, to confine, to use force, at times even to severe application of the whip. Unless some discipline is preserved, the farm will become chaotic; and I seem to be the unfortunate one elected to maintain it.

As I grow older, it becomes increasingly distasteful to me to impose my will upon any being. With the passing of the years, I have discovered that I have quite enough to do in disciplining myself, my thoughts and emotions and impulses — in keeping my own house in order. Self-discipline is the only kind that is of much worth. So long as we are self-disciplined we are free. When we must be disciplined by others, or are called upon to discipline others, we fall into one kind of bondage or another; in the first case we are held down by others, in the second we are pulled down by others.

The lust for power is the most pernicious of human weaknesses, the cause of more misery than any other. Power through political position, power through social status, power through wealth, power over our children, power over our employees, power over our domestic animals — is not the craving for any of these a manifestation of the same spiritual frailty? The enlightened man seeks to guide others by rational persuasion, by example, by the contagion of his enthusiasm; he shrinks in spiritual stature when he must resort to compulsion. Although we are sometimes forced to use



force, we should for our spirit's sake avoid such occasions to the limit of our ability. Humility is a virtue difficult to define, and the attempt to cultivate it has led to some strange paradoxes. But if we mean by humility reluctance to impose our will upon others, it is one of the foremost among all of the moral virtues.

Despite good intentions, the care of dependent animals calls for the frequent exercise of compulsive force, and so involves a spiritual danger. But our relations with free animals have an exactly opposite tendency. When we wish to cultivate their friendship, we must assume a conciliatory rather than a dominating attitude. Instead of bending them to our will, we await their spontaneous action. This might also be an undesirable situation if they were exploiting us or deliberately subjecting us to their whims. But they ask nothing of us except to be allowed to go their ways in peace. Much of the time while we watch they are heedless of us — indeed, this is the most satisfactory manner of becoming acquainted with them. When we wish to watch a bird build her nest or attend her young, to see a beaver or a muskrat at work, to follow the movements of a herd of deer, we wait for the unfolding of millenial instincts, which long antedate the individual will, rather than for the arbitrary decision of a particular animal. We can, if we are inexpert and make our presence too evident, delay the performance of the activity for which we watch; but we can not compel it. This need to be patient and self-effacing is salutary for our human egotism, which needs chastening rather than flattering. It is an exercise well fitted to make us gentle and humble.

Or if, instead of trying to cultivate a feeling of friendship and sympathy with free animals through discovering the secrets of their lives without their becoming aware of our interest, we elect a different approach and attempt to become intimate with them through breaking down their distrust of us as humans, which is the unhappy result of centuries of persecution, we shall need to exercise much the same qualities of mind. To lure the timid wild creature to take food from our hand, or to accept our unconcealed presence beside its nest, calls for vast amounts of patience, tact, and humble courtesy. An abrupt movement, a loud noise, an ill-considered gesture of familiarity, may cancel hours of persevering diplomacy. In any case, when we associate with creatures unsubdued by man we feel that we are dealing with our equals, who are free because they are self-disciplined, as we wish to be. Indeed, at times we suspect that we are face to face with our superiors. It is hardly possible to feel this way in regard to animals that are captive and dependent upon our arbitrary authority. It is more wholesome for us to associate with equals than with inferiors.

Of all the benefits we can derive from the contemplation of Nature, the most precious is insight into the harmonies that it enfolds. These harmonies in animate Nature are, it is true, only limited and relative, so that if we follow them far enough they invariably terminate in discord — in that ceaseless strife and competition between individuals and species which we have come to call "the struggle for existence." Yet despite its restricted scope, also despite the dark and gory matrix of conflict amidst which we find it, each harmonious pattern is a sacred revelation, a precursor or imperfect symbol of some ampler harmony that ceaselessly strives to fulfill itself amidst the enveloping gloom — a hint of some divine order struggling to emerge from chaos.

These harmonies are of various orders and degrees. First there is the internal harmony between cells and organs, processes and functions, without which no organism, however humble, could continue to live. Then there is the harmonious adaptation of the organism to the environment in all its aspects, which is equally essential to the maintenance of life. Of a still higher degree of complexity, hence more difficult to achieve and to preserve, are the social harmonies between individuals of the same kind, or even between animals of distinct species. When we watch birds rear their offspring, witnessing the nice coordination of the activities of the male and female who assist at the nest, and the fine articulation of the behavior patterns of parents and young, observing also how the restriction of breeding pairs to definite, mutually recognized territories diminishes conflict between them, we behold a social harmony of marvellous perfection within its limited sphere. When we watch a friendly company of birds of perhaps a dozen species foraging through the woodland, or when we understand how the many kinds of birds nesting in a garden or an orchard rear their families with little interference from each other, we recognize a loose society that transcends the limits of species.

These harmonious adjustments between the parts and functions of the individual, between the organism and its environment, between members of the same species, and between animals of diverse species, were perfected slowly during the course of countless generations. We seek in vain among our dependent animals for adjustments as perfect as those that we discover in free animals. They are not so well adapted to their environment, hence are on the whole less hardy and more subject to disease. Compared with the nicely balanced social relations we witness in many free creatures, those of domestic animals are crude, disorderly, and often repugnant. The causes of this lack of harmony are obvious. We have transported our domestic animals over the face of the earth without much regard for their original adaptations to climate, soil, vegetation, and associated fauna. This accounts for their lack of hardiness and vulnerability to plagues of all sorts. On our farms we herd to-

(Continued on page 162)

ANIMAL FRIENDS, DEPENDENT AND FREE

(Continued from page 136)

gether individuals and groups, which, if they could obey their instincts, would drift apart; we tear families asunder with no consideration for parental and social bonds. No wonder our domestic animals so often fight, and misbehave, and mismate, and act in a manner to try our patience and disgust us. Under equivalent circumstances, our own conduct would probably be even more disorderly.

If the relations of our domestic animals among themselves leave much to be desired, their relations with their masters are hardly more felicitous. They have not been associated with us for the requisite number of generations, or under conditions sufficiently uniform, for the necessary adjustments to become innate. They too often fail to understand our desire for cleanness, for quiet and repose, for promptness in the execution of tasks and journeys, for preserving from all depredations the plants we sow. Of all our domestic animals, the dog is most understanding of our moods and responsive to our will. But the relation of the dog to its owner is that of slave and master, not of two beings who can respect each other as equals. The dog is cringing and subservient as no other domestic animal I know. He is a sychophant, who wagged his way into acceptance by primitive man and holds his place by playing with infinite finesse upon the vanity of his civilized descendants. This has won for our canine friend the exaggerated panegyrics of Maeterlinck and others who are not displeased to imagine that they are looked upon as "gods." As though we needed the encouragement of lambent tongue and swinging tail to fortify our flagging egotism! If we wish the testimony of the animal kingdom as to our godlike nature, let us be impartial and take it all together. Do these free creatures running and hopping and creeping and flying in a frenzy to escape as we pass through their haunts regard us as benevolent gods or as frightful devils?

One reason for this almost universal fear of man is his association with the dog. With him we pass through meadow and woodland like a fire-engine through a sleepy town, shattering every creature's repose, causing each alarmed citizen of the uncultivated places to scurry in one direction or another in a mad effort to escape this most devastating combination of keen nose, sharp eyes, admonitory bark, and incomprehensible power to strike at a distance. The dog makes it more difficult for us to cultivate harmonious relations with free animals, and his subservience foments our already egregious human pride. I doubt that this is a relationship to be encouraged.

Although it has been my experience that contacts with free creatures are more enlightening and satisfying than association with dependent animals, I shall not go so far as to suggest that children be denied pets. These have often been stepping-stones to a wider intimacy with the living world. But I believe that pets should be few in number, and of kinds that have been so long domesticated that their needs are well understood and can be satisfied, rather than recent captives from the wild which too often languish and die. If the child is permitted to keep his pet only so long as he attends it faithfully, his ownership may promote his sense of duty, of benevolence, and of responsibility to dependents. His animal friend may be used to train his powers of observation, and for early exercises in keeping records. But as soon as possible he should be helped to find satisfaction and delight in creatures as free as himself and subject to no man's will. To the seeing eye and the understanding mind, the commonest animal that in garden or dooryard leads its free, untramelled life according to its ancestral pattern, can teach more, and more generously reward our patience, than some rare, strange creature that has been torn from its natural setting and subjected to our pleasure.

As to farm animals, I believe that economic prudence no less than humanitarian feeling must with the passage of the years lead us to keep fewer and fewer. Since animals are not primary producers but merely transformers of foodstuffs, there is tremendous loss of potential human food in rearing them in order to use their products. A hundred acres will support far more men if planted to grains, fruits, and vegetables than if devoted to livestock; and wherever populations have become dense, the consumption of animal products has perforce diminished. As we learn to take full advantage of the great variety of proteins which the vegetable kingdom provides directly, there is less inclination to resort to animal flesh in order to balance our diet. With the more intensive production of foodstuffs made possible by improvements in agriculture and the elimination of livestock from the farms, we should be able — the human population remaining the same — greatly to reduce the area of cultivated land. The less fertile lands retired from cultivation would be allowed to revert to wilderness and serve for recreation, for the sustained production of much-needed timber, and as a home for free animals. Here they would be allowed to work out their own destinies. Too long have they been enslaved, driven about, mutilated, and made to serve another's end. It will be better for us no less than for them when we cease to impose our will upon them.