

Tendrils

By ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

THE DULL, uncultivated mind is interested in scarcely anything beyond the sensations of the body to which it is attached. As our spirit grows, it puts forth tendrils, which fasten themselves to things without us, whether to impersonal objects or to other minds. According to our nature, the tendrils we send out are either intellectual or esthetic, or a combination of both: some will fix themselves to surrounding things chiefly by knowing about them; others largely by bonds of feeling and sympathy. The greater our mental and spiritual capacity, the more numerous are the tendrils we develop, the more varied the objects to which they cling.

Youth is the proud and jubilant period of life, because it is then that these spiritual tendrils burgeon forth with the greatest frequency and ease. We experience a sensation of growth, of expansion, as at no other stage of existence. Almost daily we can point to some new acquisition of mind, to some new spiritual growth. Then we are rarely oppressed, and never for long, by that feeling of cessation of growth, of stagnation, which casts so dreary a shadow over all too many

of our later days. Yet if we are wise, we shall see that this process of growth continues through all the years of our life. If the studies we have hitherto pursued failed to yield us new truths—doubtless not because we have sounded them to the bottom, but rather because we have run out all of our sounding line—then we should look about for new ones. If old enthusiasms grow stale, we must seek fresh interests. Perhaps it is a wise practice to acquire a new interest every few years, to the end that we may never lose the sensation of growth, and that our minds and spirits may never grow old.

The objects that stimulate the growth of tendrils are as diverse as the temperaments of men. Music, minerals, sculpture, snail-shells, art, ants, the stars, orchids, antiquities, mosses, butterflies, birds—the list is unending. Those pursuits are most to be preferred that favor the growth of tendrils compounded of both knowledge and feeling, for when formed by the interweaving of these two strands

they are strongest and most enduring. Whatever class of objects produces these attachments—whether the stars that shine in the heavens or the mosses that form a green carpet over the face of a rock—should be treated with the utmost affection and respect, even with reverence; for it causes our spirit to stretch beyond ourselves, to send its tendrils groping through the vast mysteries of creation. Any study pursued with an earnest and enthusiastic mind, with love rather than gain or fame as a motive, is capable of producing this effect.

To those of us who love Nature in any of her myriad manifestations, no tendrils are so sacred and dearly cherished as those we attach to other living things. A garden, wrote Francis Bacon, “is the purest of human pleasures. It is the greatest refreshment to the spirits of man.” And more than three centuries later, Donald Culross Peattie began his beautiful account of the lives and achievements of the great naturalists with much the same sentiment: “Of all things under the sun that a man may love, the living world he loves most purely.”

These tendrils, which attach us to the objects of our love and contemplation, also furnish the strongest and most enduring bonds between mind and mind. In our business transactions with other men, we are motivated by love of gain; and all too often our profit is the other fellow's loss. In our social intercourse, too, we are much of the time ruled by the desire to dazzle, to dominate, to be considered more clever than Mr. X or more charming than Mrs. Y. But when two people who share the same enthusiasm for Nature come together, their conversation takes on a loftier, nobler tone. They forget self and all sordid advantages or gains, freely giving and receiving their toil-somely acquired treasures of knowledge and experience. And in giving no less than in taking they find their store of wealth increase, for old memories and the discoveries of bygone days acquire fresh life and heightened colors as they are recounted to a sympathetic mind.

These tendrils, these bonds of knowledge, of love

and of sympathy between ourselves and what is beautiful, lovable and true in the universe without us, form indeed the "flowery band to bind us to the earth." It is the severance of these sweet and tender bonds, far more than the separation of spirit and body, that makes death a gloomy and fearful thing to contemplate. We shall no more hear the blithesome songs of birds, nor look upon the stars, nor probe into the mysterious lives of insects, nor admire the works of the old masters, nor pore over the secrets of the ancient rocks. But ought not the very length and strength of these tendrils, the intensity of feeling with which we cherish them, the horror with which we view their severance, fill us

with hope rather than with fear? We have grown out beyond the narrow limits of our bodies with their five senses, and sent our tendrils groping for support through the great universe beyond. The farther they have stretched, the greater their number, and the more varied the objects to which they have become attached, the more nearly we have approached to the divine nature which reaches and embraces all. And having so far outgrown the quintal or two of earth and water in which it dwells, may not the spirit perchance survive their dissolution, and continue to grow out and through the vast, unending diversity of the universe, until it reaches the Infinite, and becomes one with it?