

The Gamut of Life
and other Verse

MARY PIERSON CHENEY

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Foreword

These poems written over a space of years, Roger has recently asked me to compile, that my children, grand-children and any interested friends should have them as a record of my unextraordinary but not confined life.

They concern the Adirondacks, camping in Canada and the later ones the Southwest, New Mexico, and they reflect my inner life wherever I happened to be.

Poetry has always had a singular appeal for me, believing as Louis Untermeyer expressed it, that "Poetry is the shortest emotional distance between two points".

I trust they may give some enjoyment and to the grand-children they may be a reminder of a loving grandmother.

M. P. C.

1948

Fisher's Island Scene

(Written to Add to Horace's Hunting Experiences)

When I think of Fisher's Island,
The scene of our playtime and dream,
Comes the sense of the early mornings,
The Frost on the Lowland, and gleam
Of the sun as it touches the water,
The quiet sheen on the bay
And glint on the boulder wavelets
As seaward they wash away.

I hear not the crack of the huntsman,
But just the breakfast gong
And Charlie and Horace and Ruthie
And Bush and I trudge along,
And we stoke and enjoy the coffee
And many a good Chapman thing,
And we laugh a good deal as we eat them
And plot what the day shall bring.
What land the game man has allotted
Each hunter to range this morn,
And decide which doggie is fittest
The moors, the briars, the thorn,
To cover with willing effort
All the ground the birds may have gone.
And oh! How the dogs love the moorland
And nose the strong salt air,
And we all breathe in the sweet fragrance
Of bay leaves and ocean there,
And rejoice for that divine order
Which has made such an atmosphere.

Fisher's is an isle of beauty
On a frosty autumn day,
And passionate wish of the sportsman
Is gratified by the prey,
By the fall of the bright-plumed pheasant
When the gun-shot has been true,
And Bookie or Rum or Davie
Have volunteered the cue.

I love the sense of the ocean,
I love to lie in the sand,
I love to look up to the heaven
So blue above the strand.
I love the tiny sails as they flitter by on the sea
I love the sense of God's goodness
That comes so straight to me,
And yes, I love most "particular"
Our goodly company,
Charlie and Ruth, Bush and Horace,
Bookie and Rum and Me.

Spring 1919—

Brook in Keene Valley

Symbol of Life of Mary Bushnell Cheney

It was a mountain brook, and sprang from clearest soil, in heights
unsullied—

It took its way, first down a steep and narrow rock-bed with a
dash and glint that

Showed its own enjoyment.

It was not a shallow thing but one whose course was swift and
current strong.

Nor did it pause on mountain-side for aught but rarest moments
to furrow deeply into stone.

At length the slope became more gradual—

The Brook outspread and motion lessened—

It sank more deeply into soil

And, by its borders, green spears and tiny

Sand-grown flowers or brightest hues sprang up.

It learned it had above it warmest sunshine, bluest sky—

And branches green

And that it could reflect the beauty of the

Path God made it.

Would it but more slowly flow—

It reached the meadow, and every flower and grass of field
luxuriated in its passage—

It fed the pines

And in its deeper waters, fish abode—

And bye and bye it came upon a woodland—

A spot of sweetest pine and willow—

And in this fairest hollow, it paused

And all its force amassed—

It sank deeply into the earth,

And formed a beauteous basin.

And grew about it graceful fern and wild orchid

Which perforce must have such depths and coolness—

But mostly it delighted those who came

To linger by it for sake of refreshment and sweet meditation.

God could shape a brooklet's course,

Yet more divinely one human life—

The Fawn

Keene Valley September 1932

I'm a fawn, hiding in the mountains.
I've left my mother, feeding in the lush grasses of the meadows,
I've no motive beyond escaping surveillance—
I've learned my young limbs can carry me up a slope—
My nose scents the sweet wood fragrance of the pine trees,
My ears hear the murmur of the branches swayed by the wind.

Sunlight envelops the mountain sides—
I will go and enjoy the freedom of whiffing, sniffing and scrambling,

I'm a fawn, my world is sport.
I reek not of care, filial or parental,
This is my day, let me to the grounds of gayest gambol—
The shade grows deeper,
The trees whisper softer,
But the birds are calling low to their mates—
I have no mate.

My legs ache from gamboling—
Whither shall I go to lay me down and sleep?
Who shall shield me?
My mother feeds at the bottom of the cliff—
She cannot meet my return—
Up-wind there comes a scent I have not known.
I scent it again—
It is not of my kind—
It breathes of hunger—
It searches prey—
I listen and a deep snarl comes up the slope.
O, wind, change, divert the course
My unconscious, sweet breath betrays!

O No! 'Tis I must fly—
Or better still strong nature's current intervene
Before that beast espies me.

I look, I peer, and moments seem a year—
O, rushing water.

Below and down a tree-clad cliff
I hear a roaring brook.
I must reach it!
I start, I hold, I slip, I slide—
Nor ever stop, and down its side I go—
Louder grows the sound of roaring stream—
And now, I fall onto the level.
Sweet and cool to my feet is the water,
And welcome to a panic-stricken but heaven-guided little fawn!

M. P. C.

Lac la Pêche

*At the Laurentian Club, Province of Quebec, Fishing Trip,
Summer 1926*

O Tree! That stands on the point of land that juts out into the lake,
You seem to say to the man on the trail,
"Pause and yourself betake."
You, with your arms and your frondular charms,
Bid him come and behold the domain,
Of the lone, gaunt pine on the little lake that lies 'tween the sky
and the plain.

It's a tear that's dropped from the eye of God.
Straight into the heart of the hills,
Girt all round with matchless green and with glowing ripples
filled—
And to the man who truly thrills with the love of the woods and
trails,
It's a little kingdom to be sought
When the chance comes that he hails!

M. P. C.

The Gamut of Life

1922

The gleam of day that breaks way down the long horizon—
The song that pours from out the throats of little birds
In darkly silhouetted trees—
The eyes that open wide beside me,
And smiling say, Now God be Blessed, another day!
I pulse to things like these!
The ragged waif at evening on the street,
Who turns her un-lit way a'toward the lighted shop—
And craves with poignant sense
The food, or clothes or doll.
Receives with glistening eyes from a beholder's hand—
The thing of human need, but to that giver, gives
The chance to understand the boon it is to succor and to feed.
And I have seen the tiny forms of infants into children grow,
And had the babies at my side
And felt their arms and hearts aglow.
And I have watched in little minds
A thought appear,
And, then, an aim
A small accomplishment achieved,
And I have joyed o'er little gain.

I know the grace of children grown—
New aims, conditions, problems rife
O' truly may God point each soul to love of service, whence is life,
To him beside whom I have lived these twenty years—
And felt the loving buoyant life that springs incessant in his soul
And known the wisdom of his thought—
And faith when wisdom went for naught—
May mutual blessings long o'erflow!

And yet there'll come in seasons when, I know not why,
Perhaps the winter's long
Or glimmerings of a better spring
Will tantalize, hallucinate—
And I shall yearn, I cannot say for whom,
But yearn as only women can.
For one whose lightest word I understand—

And yet I know him little—I love his quirks,
And in the field of intercourse that's light and merry I may take
his hand
And lightly dance and love a little—yes,
O this I e'en may know!

But when the hour is dark,
Nor husband, love or child,
Brings peace and fulness to the soul
I take me to a quiet spot.
The stars are out—the moon is high—
Or else perhaps in quiet sunshine, I will sit and sit—
And calmly say to One I know
“There is goodness here and peace
Reflected light of Thy Omnipotence.
The sunshine's warm—it is a part of Thee
The air is soft, it is Thy Gentleness—
The arms around me, They are strong, they are Thine own”—
“But They have been there always, child,” I hear His voice,

To this, I say,
“Dear Lord, in stillness I discover Them.”

M. P. C.

The Query

About 1930

Is it in this flower's bloom, dew made?
(Its fragrance crushed within the hand.)
Or bluest sunlit heaven
Where idly clouds expand,
Or somber stones in mountain brook,
Brought to an iridescent gleam
Or in a smile we can't foresee
That which we seek,—Divinity?
Of natural and of human life
All these are but expressions.
What most I think we yearn to know—
As all effects evince below—
Is whence the living force within!
We quarry to the source to learn
"Where may the spirit be?"

The Answer

After ten or twelve years of subconscious inquiry, this came as a seeming reply to "Where Does the Spirit Dwell".

I looked out on the sunshine,
Thinking the world was fair;
And again on the bright night sky,
I reached for the stars that were there.
I scented the fragrance of roses
In the dewy morning air,
And knew that God spoke through them,
But where was He, oh where?
And why did I not find Communion with Him I sought to know?

"Perhaps you seek too far, my child" a voice said, sweet and low
"Whatever your circumstances,
However your heart may ache,
An unfailling tryst you may have with Him,
If this thought your own you'll make.

The God you yearn to know so,
Is the Maker of us all,
He loves you as no mortal can,
But strives to make you call
To Him, as child to parent—
You must do your part—
Thank Him for everything that comes,
And take Him to your heart."

My Sister Lucy's Garden at Greenwich

Old Church Road

The garden has always flowered
Along its narrow sward—
A smooth green carpet from the door,
Out to a pine-crest board.

Lilies white, delphiniums,
And edged with tender blue
Forget-me-nots and pansies,
And pastels dotted through.

To the sense it had full meaning,
But my sister had a thought—
The garden needed a blessing—
And, so, a saint besought.

Now in the farthest corner,
There stands a figure meek,
St. Francis leaning towards the birds,
Scattering crumbs they seek.
A basin, too, is at his feet,
With rain water from the sky—

And, as he ministers to them,
More hidden there doth lie,
A truth for souls,
To lead them far upward, yes, on high.

1938 In the Spring

Kansas

*Written on a Pullman sleeper—on a train called "The Chief"
from Chicago to Santa Fe—1940*

I'm awaking up in Kansas in the morning:

The sky, it is no color—
The grass, it is not green—
The land, it simply stretches
With nothing to be seen—

I'm waking up in Kansas in the morning—

The houses are so scattered,
And are but smallish things
No people seen about them
They must have taken wings—

I'm waking up in Kansas in the morning—

And Oh, I look so hard for folks
'A straying round their place
There aren't "None"
'Cept in cars across the state that race.
But yes, I see some children 'a-walking down
the road—
A little barn yard, cows and horse
This seems to me damn good—
A woman at her clothes line,
Some hens within the coop—
'Tis all there is before me,
Expressed in one fell swoop.

And now, upon the scene
A'welcoming the day
Is a herd of brownish cattle
All headed the one way,
And sun-flowers by the acre
And harvested new hay
They've shaped like loaves of golden bread,
O anywhere, I'd say—

And now the picture's quite complete
No more that can be said—
The plain it stretches on and on
I'm going back to bed—

I've been waking up in Kansas in the morning—

The Bishop's Lodge—Santa Fe

To Susie from Mother—October 2d, 1937

Never was a sky more blue—
Woodbine redder, 'gainst the pane—
Flickering aspen bough beyond
Yellower after autumn rain!

In this vale, so mountain high,
Lies a land allied to sky!
Here the Bishop of the town
Came communing with his God.

Years have passed, but not the charm
Pristine and of skyward calm.

How can soil so muddy, dour,
Yield so beauteous a flower?
How can earth-bound man expand,
Sense and mind, through glorious land?
Ah! the answer, let's eschew
Priest and Indian, these two, knew!

The Victory of Snow

The tiny flakes that fell to-day—
Infinitesimal are they—
Oh count them not but contemplate
How myriad specks may so translate
An earth-brown scene and consecrate—
So white they are, and wholly pure
Manna from heaven were less obscure.
Snow that falls, insistent, still
And thickly blankets fields and hill
Reveals the power to instill in darkest soul
a God-felt will.

My Company—the Photograph

I always feared a vacuum
Should Anne and Mary go—
The temper of their gayety—
Their high to my own low,
Used first to leave a listlessness,
And then, a rising fear—
That there was nothing left for me,
But recollection dear.

I feared to be alone—
Their blithesome company
Had soothed a greater longing for one most dear to me.

To me, what are the children, my Mary and my Anne?
His very blood personified, two generations' span—
They seem to thus reveal to me
His vigorousness of mind
His full abandonment in play.
But underneath, I find
A motivating purpose—to bless and cheer mankind.

They're gone, but I am not alone—
For from a face close by
There emanates a cheeriness—
Repose there is in this home room—
He's always with me here.

So if they come or if they go,
His company is sound—
He still abides within this house
And, thus, my peace is found.

Timmie

At this time yesterday, my boy,
You sat in a big rocking chair.
Big Teddy was in your lap,
And the new little bow-wow there—
It was in my upstairs bedroom,

The sun was shining bright—
And we looked down the snow-covered lawn—
Saw the busses pass left to right—

And you were very sunny—
And conversed in a knowing way—
That is, for a two to three oldster,
I must say I enjoyed your play—

And then, of course, we had tea—
A tiny cup for you—
Perhaps 'twas a little strong—
Grandmamas don't rate the brew.

But anyway, 'twas a party,
Never had a sweeter time—
You and Teddy and I,
As we rocked and sang a rhyme—

It cannot happen often—
But the memory stays there—
Of you and your sweet composure,
Your live-stock and rocking chair—

To Timmie from Grandma Cheney.

The Cliffords

We saw them today in their skylight home,
Brother and sister living there—
She in the kitchen working away
He on the porch in an easy chair.

With heaven above
And earth beneath,
Suspended are they between two spheres—
On a high plateau they dwell, these two.
Their fields stretch wide, they slope away
And mountain peaks, both gaunt and high
Gird them around
With a shield of clay.

They breathe of heaven;
They watch the sky.
The clouds flit by in a pattern mould—
They sunshine drink
When the day is good,
And they take the weather
In its mood.

It is sweet and grim to live thus high,
Commune with Nature on this plain!
And not to know Earth's bickerings,
But feel the snow
And love the rain.

Yet they in common with all folk
Have need of Earth
And e'en must feel
An urge for livelihood to make,
A sustenance to yield.

God gave to them a maple grove,
A sweet, abundant one, 'tis true.
In springtime warm, they draw the sap;
They boil the syrup in a vat
And sell it in quite slow degrees

To summer people coming there
At prices good, but prices fair.

The Cliffords have a waterfall,
A pool that's deep and shaded, too—
Refreshment for the visitor,
This mountain spot, this rendezvous.

I asked about an apple tree
That stood beside the homestead there;
Its blossoms shriveled were, and brown,
And not a fruit had brought to bear.

He said: "In May there'd come a snow
Awhile the blooms had looked so fair—
It chilled and withered the sweet buds,
And left them limp and hanging there".

The family graves within a plot
Are in an upland field nearby.
"We keep our dear ones within sight—
Nor mind that soon we'll with them lie".

Mary P. Cheney

