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SHORT STORY

ON SUCH A MORNING

IF you are alone in the dawn it is personal, it is yours and you share it with none. Sun happens for you only, and the birds' song is yours. If you are abroad when the land is waking you may notice all, for everything happens slowly so that you may see it.

Dawn in the country is beautiful, it reveals beauty. Also, it is strong; eyes open, bodies uncurl, there is movement in the earth's pores. When light spreads slowly over hillsides it leaves the hollows still in shadow, patches of uncertainty in the growing day. But shadows become clumps of rushes, then move, and other cattle come over the ridge, real in silhouette. Sheep, too, moving down from the tops where they have passed the night, first grey, come white. Then, fording a creek, morning is quietly there, and you can see the stones under the water, water which will soon be lively in the first sun. Big birds fly quickly from one tree to another, or run on the ground, listening, while the small ones hop in the branches, sensitive, and testing the new day with a few notes only. But the mimic magpie is bold, and following him, the birds soon take quietness from the morning and everywhere there is sound, goodness and gladness. The best moments have gone, but if you are alone in the dawn, everything is still happening for you only.

ON such a morning a young man slowly climbed an old sledge-track through fragrant manuka to see what he had in his traps. He knew what he would find, and because there was no hurry he walked slowly, idly counting the rabbits which flashed or crouched at his approach. The manuka's scent hung heavy along the track; the very flies forgot their morning buzzing in the richness of the air, and crawled in heavy clusters on the tree-trunks. At a drinking-hole muddy water trickled into fresh hoof-prints, and sometimes when he stopped he could hear the deer moving along their bush-tracks. Up through the manuka and birch he went, pausing occasionally for an unfamiliar sound, occasionally startled by the sudden plunge and crackle of a deer in the undergrowth. Now the early sun filtered through the trees to him, sharpening his breath with its brighter light and everywhere quivering on the dew which weighed down grass, spider-webs and clematis with its lovely water-pearls. Then without warning the morning's beauty flooded in round him and, ashamed, he walked quickly on.

There was nothing in the first trap, and the young man was glad as he looked down at it. The slice of apple on the plate was shrivelled, and where he had nicked bark from the tree to mark the place the naked trunk was dry and already yellowing. A fresh slice of apple, then he moved on. He knew what to expect at the next one; even



Written for "The Listener" by
GEOFFREY WILSON

before he saw the tree the scratching, scurrying noises reached him, and the faint clink of a chain sounded alien in the quiet bush. He killed the opossum and shoved it in a sack, re-setting the trap hurriedly. What a messy business; and up that ridge were dozens more traps waiting to be done. . . . He remembered a morning last season when it had hailed all night, and he'd found all those animals in his traps, muddy and frozen to death. . . .

And so it went on for an hour, and another. Once he found a yellow-black creature caught by its hind legs. In a semi-circle at the tree's base there was but bare earth where the trapped animal had thrashed away the sticks and leaves in its efforts to escape. The thing screamed and spat at him in wild defiance. He was frightened, not of the animal which jerked in the trap, but of the disapproving, even threatening faces he felt turned on him all round in the bush. The black trunks of the pungas seemed darker still, mingling with the shadows, and in the far-away parts of the bush he imagined a surging of angry voices.

When he had lugged the last sack to the end of his line the young man sat down on a boulder. The bush flowed away from him on either side of the ridge, there was no beauty now. Looking at his bloody hands, he recalled his father's words of the previous evening.

"Possums are still going up, Eric," he'd said, "You ought to make a good bit this season."

Yes, he ought to make a good bit. "You know, these darn possums are getting to be a real pest," his father had said. "Clear out as many of the brutes as you can. Skin the bush right out."

HE'D been killing for weeks . . . yes, skinning the bush right out; and the stalkers were skinning out the deer, too, (continued on next page)