

## REVERENCE FOR LIFE

By Morgan Bulkeley

IT ALL BEGAN over the morning coffee on one of those late March mornings when song sparrows first sing in the hedges. We were watching a crow on the lawn. In that clownish amble that is nearly a waddle, it was gathering twigs and snatches of grass that suited its nesting fancy. When lo. . .

A deer came trotting through the yard, the first we had ever seen in this settled section at the edge of Pittsfield. It was a tired but purposeful doe, at this season probably carrying fawn. She passed two other houses, was turned by tennis-court wire, and headed down the Housatonic River. Watch as we did through breakfast, we never saw the anticipated dogs appear on the trail. Had she given them the slip?

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AN HOUR LATER there arose such a hullabaloo of barking down river that I set out through deep corn snow half-dreading to investigate. Flocks of redwings piping and skirling in the river swamp signaled spring's new upsurge. The mud was deep in the old river road, and soon enough the doe's heart-shaped prints showed, close together, indicating the slow pace of exhaustion, now traversing bare patches of sod, now back to the road to avoid deep snow. The relentless dog tracks were there too.

A half mile downstream the barking, yapping and baying divided into five distinct, excited voices. A little nearer, and I could see the pack had their victim in the river where a large undercut elm had

toppled cross-current and another had drifted, top foremost, into it forming a log-jam and cove against the bank. The hapless deer stood in this perilous sanctuary, probably on a slippery, underwater tree-trunk, her nose barely above the icy onrush of spring melt. Her ears were wet but erect. Through binoculars I could easily see the flaring nostrils and wild dark eyes. She was literally driven within an inch of her last breath.

The eager dogs completely encircled her: a brown mongrel on the far bank, a long-haired nondescript and a hound on the near, a large collie out on one tree at the middle of the river within 10 feet of her head, and another hound on the other tree even closer. All were clambering and barking furiously.

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AS I APPROACHED, the three dogs on the banks vanished into the woods in the manner of professionals that had been shot at in their trade. The two amateurs were treed, so to speak. Finally I coaxed the powerful collie off the tree-bridge, slipped a rope through his collar and led him to the nearest house, thence to the owner. The hound met me half-way back to the river. He was too cagey to be caught but followed to what proved to be his home nearby. It would have accomplished little to have had the amateurs shot, as the law prescribes, while the pros got away scot-free.

The two housewives had not heeded what we had heard half a mile away; nor would they have suspected their fireside pets. Indeed, I scarcely think they believed me.

I returned to the scene, but only near enough to ascertain that the professionals had not reappeared. The deer had struggled a little higher so that her neck was out of water. I left her to her own

chances, believing the SPCA would have drowned her with good intentions.

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UNDER THE circumstances, one could hardly blame the dogs in their instinct; one could hardly blame the owners in their ignorance; one could hardly blame the doe in her innocence. There is probably a law as inexorable as that of survival of the fittest, namely, that the more dense the population (dogs, men or deer), the less the reverence for life. How could it be otherwise?

There were 40 houses nearer than ours to the clamor and climax of the hunt. The haranguing clearly indicated more than a cat up a tree. Yet, in the half hour getting there and the 20 minutes subduing the dogs, not a soul put in an appearance. The deer might just as well have been in the Ganges.

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IN THE AFTERNOON we went again to be sure no dogs had returned. The deer had disappeared leaving no tracks in mud or snow on our side of the river. She may have regained enough strength to swim across, though the current was strong and the far bank overhanging. It seemed more likely that she swam, or was swept, downstream with the melting snow to make it, or almost make it, through another winter.

We turned back upriver, leaving behind one more never-to-be-answered question. A startled woodcock, first of the new season, sprang up and whirled away on squeaky wings. Life was going on.