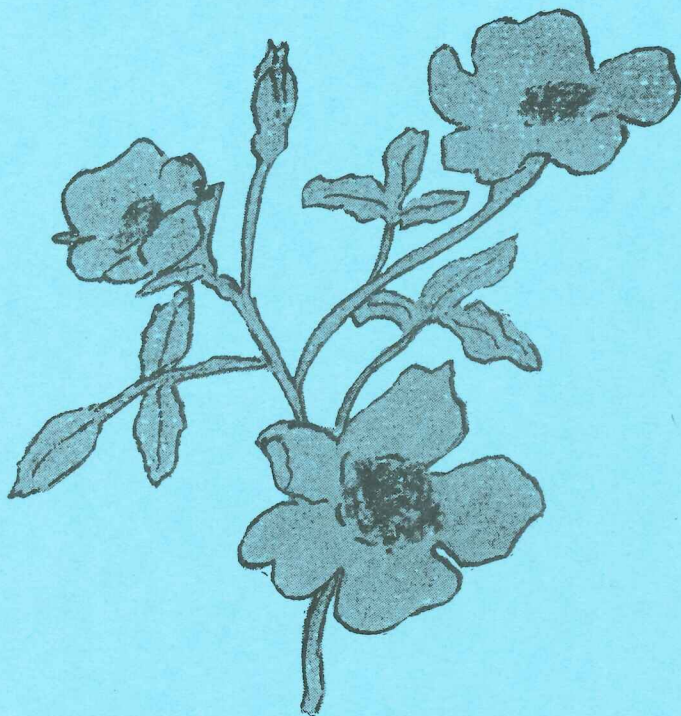


Song Of The Swampland



“And the Wild Swamp Rose bends nearly
Out above the water-mirror
And surprised at its own beauty
Blushes faintly, sweetly pink.”

Margaret Burrage Clarke

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Margaret Burrage Clarke

FOREWORD

Situated in the North-west corner of the tiny hill-top town of Petersham lies Tom Swamp and a pond commonly called Meadow-Water. It is of this I write in *Song of the Swampland*.

The poem is descriptive and entirely true, although only a part of the charm of the Swamp is in it. Nothing has been said of the quiet wood roads encircling the pond, their carpet of brown needles soft beneath one's feet. Nor of the ruins of an old water-wheel that once filled the wood-lands with the noise of its creaking industry.

The blush rose and the lily-of-the-valley still bloom around the cellar holes of homes long gone. Mute testimony of the beauty-loving, lonely women who planted them. Civilization leaves only slight scars behind Her and Nature with infinite artistry covers them, retaining only what is beautiful and blending all into a perfect whole.

The Swamp and its surrounding wood-lands belong to the Harvard College and is used by them for reforestation and experimentation, and in Petersham itself is the Harvard Forestry School, an imposing red brick structure built in the exact style of Harvard College.

The house where Old Tom, the negro, once lived and worked still stands and is owned by Miss R. M. Edwards, at present of Dedham. For a Winter and Spring we walked the Swampland together, and she, too, learned to love its beauty.

That some of this beauty will be imparted to the Reader by this poem is the humble wish of

THE AUTHOR.

1978

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as a Memorial to
Ruth Beals Buell
lover of poetry and nature

SONG OF THE SWAMPLAND

This is the Song of the Swampland—
Long—long has it laid there.
There mid the pine and the hemlock,
Deep-fringed by tall marsh grasses.
Here the squaws in the autumn
Threaded their way through the bog-lands
To gather the ruby jewels—
Gather the ripe cranberries
That grew on the deep swamp's bosom.
Here, too, the early settlers
Walked o'er the treacherous footing
To gather the hay for their cattle,
And brave, young boys—fool-hardy
Stood on planks on the bog-land
Punching deep holes in its bottom
To fish in its under-ground waters.
Here, Old Tom the negro
Thinking to speed the hay's harvest
Drove his master's horses
Out on the shaky morass
Down from the Swamp's deep bottom
Came a greedy chuckle!
Here was food for the Swampland!
Here revenge on the mortals.
The Swampland opened and took them.
Took team, wagon and driver.
Loud were the screams of the horses
And the frightened cries of the negro.
But the black Swamp close'd o'er them.
Old Tom went to His Maker.
E'en now on a summer's evening
When no stars dot the mantle of darkness

You can hear their cries from the Causeway,
And then on the wind—you can hear him.
A rich, mellow voice in the evening
Singing a negro spiritual.
And thus from this dire, tragic dying
Was born the name of the Swampland.
Named for a homeless negro
Who worked for a near-by farmer.
Thus they named it Tom Swamp,
And found the name most fitting.
Then a man from Petersham's hill-tops—
A man well-known for his kindness
Donated the money to make there
A pond—to be named in his honor.
Gladly he gave the money
And in return asked only
That it be named for him—Brook's Pond.
And so o'er a part of the Swampland
There grew a thing of beauty.
A pond with pine-dotted islands
With blue, unruffled waters.
Soon the long-legged heron,
The bittern and the wild duck
Lived along its edges.
Then as though to rival
The whiteness of the lilies
There came from the South, the white egret
And there on Brook's Pond raised his family.
Many from far and near watched them.
A rare thing and one of great beauty.
And on all who loved the Swampland
There grew an inner fineness
A new appreciation
Of God and all His wonders.
From his favorite rock near the Pond's edge,
A famous man, R. T. Fisher
Professor of Harvard College
Watched the bird-life on the waters.

And here at his death, his students
All of whom loved him dearly
There on his rock had a plaque made
In memory of hours he spent there.
And there in the Upper Swampland
In my early childhood I wandered
Like a wee, wild thing from the woodlands
And my childish feet made pathways
As I climbed the Rim-Rock's edges.
And ever beside me the Brown Dog
Vigilantly travelled.
For "The Girl" was a changling, a Pixie,
And the Brown Dog shared her magic.
Over the Rim-Rock she scrambled
Scorning the easiest climbing
Til, swinging down on the bare rock
From the over-hanging branches
The Girl reached the magic Pineland
Where the Fairy Ring was waiting.
And, as the Brown Dog watched her
The Girl loosed confining hair-braids
And a taffy-colored cascade
Of hair enveloped her body.
Then at a secret signal
The Girl called Queen Mab and her fairies
And the Girl and the Dog danced with them
Till the cock crew and they left her.
Then with swiftly flying fingers
She braided the shining masses
And from out a shoulder knap-sack
She took a turkey feather
Filtched from an unused duster
Hung in her mother's pantry.
This at a rakish angle
She placed high up in her top-knot
And the sure-footed Indian Maiden
Threaded o'er precarious footing
To a rock hung over the Valley

Indian Rock by name.
Then with hand to shade her eye-sight
She scanned the far-off horizon.
Noted the 'Pond's sparkling beauty
And on the far away hill-tops
Some of Petersham's houses.
At last, a weary explorer
With her dog pushed through the brambles
And reaching Stub Pine lay panting
On the sun-hardened mosses.
The Brown Dog pressed close beside her
And the wind from the tree-tops below them
Blew back his curls as he sat there.
At last rested—the Girl from her knapsack
Brought forth a meager repast
And together the comrades shared it.
And many were the adventures
That Tom Swamp saw them sharing.
Once the Little Girl's Brother
Built a green boat, and though Sisters
Were always a nuisance, he often
Took the Girl on the water with him.
Her small arms were quite unable
To row the boat, but he taught her
To paddle, and the Brown Dog
Proudly sat beside her.
On the biggest of the islands
He built a tiny shanty
And for a time he lived there
Alone with his thoughts and Nature.
Once, he rowed all the girls and their Mother
Out to the little island
And over the stove he had fashioned
They made a "coachey-hatchey"
A pork stew thickened with crackers.
There were frog's legs, too, and fried fish
With fresh water from the Main-land
But all too soon this adventuring

Was stopped by The Harvard's orders
And the tiny island abandoned
But the pine trees sighed for them often.
And when The Girl was a "Grown Girl"
She came back to the island
And there by the black, charred embers
That once was a cheery campfire
She found a board with letters
Obscured by time and weather,
That had been burned by boyish fingers
With a wood-burning set saved from Christmas.
And The Girl with tears and sorrow
Left it there as he had placed it
Felt it was a memorial fitting
For a boy who spent his life-time
All in nineteen swift, sweet summers.
Oft the Girl climbed to the Stub Pine
And when beset by sorrows,
Childish or those more grown-up
The clean winds of the Rim-Rock
Quieted the tumult
And gave her sure, firm courage.
Until in laughing fancy,
She renamed it, Consolation.
Deep in the heart of the Swampland
Dwell the Brothers of the Forest.
The mighty spruce and hemlock
Hold hands to make a haven
For the deer oppressed by hunters.
And in the bitter winter
The snow-storms added burden
But bends their arms still closer
That the wild things may be warm.
And Green-Eyes, the fierce bold Bob-cat
As he stalks the frightened rabbit
Is out-witted by the marsh-grass
Where cunning paths are hidden,
And he screams his disappointment

As he pads back to his rock-den
For full well he knows his screaming
Has warned all of his nearness
And because he lost his temper
He must hungry go to bed.
In the Ledges, where rock chambers
Form a shelter for their slumbers
Live the porcupines in safety
And their lumbering, waddling bodies
May be seen by careful watching
Through the fissures in the rock-pile.
Long ago, the Indian Maidens
Used their quills to make a trimming
On their moccasins of deer-skin,
But they live now unmolested
Save by few who come to watch them.
When the Spring comes to the Swampland
Then you see her in her glory.
Then the birds in all their colors
Vie with vivid flower coverlets
That bloom on the woods and marshes.
Here the downy yellow violet,
The arbutus and hepatica
Blossom in the early Springtime,
And each month more blossoms proudly
Pass on in review.
On the Causeway where rude fingers
Cannot pluck it from its branches
Flames the gorgeous rhododendron
With its roots on shaky boglands.
And beside the wooden bridge-way
In an open pool of water
Blooms the stately Water Arum
Calla Lily of the Swamp.
Near, too, grows the scarce seen sun-dew
As it traps unwary insects
All unknowing of its power.
And the wild Swamp Rose bends nearly

Out above the water-mirror
And surprised at its own beauty
Blushes faintly, sweetly pink.
On the surface of the water
Held by unseen fairy fingers
Bloom sweet-scented water-lilies
Virgin white with hearts of gold.
And the bright sun beams down over
All the wonders of the Swampland
And a whispering from the pine-trees
Tells of South-Wind's slender fingers
As she plucks upon their needles
Playing soft, sweet summer tunes.
On the Pond's edge that untiring
Patient fisher, the Blue Heron
Izaak Walton of the marshes,
Standing one-legged in the waters,
Waits for hours for frogs and fishes
To swim by him unsuspecting.
Then with lightening thrust by sharp bill,
His long patience is rewarded,
And the Heron has his fill.
In the more secluded forests
When the trees are bare of leafage,
In the very early Springtime
That sweet singer of the woodland
With his restless tail of rufous
Sings his song of exultation
Sweet-voiced Hermit Thrust at e'ven
Sings his praises of Tom Swamp.
And that tiny unassuming
Olive bird with ruby crown on,
Is the King of all the Forest,
And his song is second only
To Court Singer, Hermit Thrush.
In the clearings by the Swamp edge
Their glad singing cheered the families
Of the hardy folk who lived there,

But their homes are gone, and Nature
Now reclaims them for her own.
It would ever seem pathetic
That old farmlands made by loving
And unstinting, tireless labors
Should have only been for naught.
Thus it was with my own grandsire
He, whose produce well-supported
All his family, and the maiden
Aunts who lived with them.
Now the fertile lands of Rimrock
By the fast-encroaching sumac
And the young birch and the poplar
Slowly, surely, are laid waste.
And because his two sons quarreled
At his death, the well-loved homestead
Passed into the hands of strangers,
And the lane where once cows ambled
To the lush and fragrant green grass
Lays unused except by pickers
Of the succulent blue-berry.
But the Swampland never changes.
Here the wood ferns in the forest
Grow waist high, and many wonders—
Many treasures undiscovered
Blossom by the way.
If you travel by State Highway
You will never see the beauties
Of the Swampland in its glory.
You must rather come as Indians
Quiet-voiced and soft of foot-fall.
You must travel by the wood-road
And leave motor-cars behind you,
For the Swampland is unchanging
And it lies there as of old.