Joseph Wood Krutch

The TWELVE SEASONS

A Perpetual Calendar for the Country

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April

The Day of the Peepers

Hyla crucifer is what the biologists call him, but to most of us he is simply the Spring Peeper. The popularizers of natural history have by no means neglected him but even without their aid he has made himself known to many whose only wild flower is the daisy and whose only bird is the robin. Everyone who has ever visited the country in the spring has heard him trilling from the marsh at twilight, and though few have ever caught sight of him most know that he is a little, inch-long frog who has just awaked from his winter sleep. In southern Connecticut he usually begins to pipe on some day between the middle of March and the middle of April,

and I, like most country dwellers, listen for the first of his shrill, cold notes.

Throughout the winter, neighbors who met in the village street have been greeting one another with the conventional question: "Is it cold enough for you?" Or, perhaps, if they are of the type which watches a bit more carefully than most the phenomenon of the seasons, they have been comparing thermometers in the hope that someone will admit to a minimum at least one degree higher than what was recorded "over my way." Now, however, one announces triumphantly: "Heard the peepers last night," and the other goes home to tell his wife. Few are High Church enough to risk a "Christ is risen" on Easter morning, but the peepers are mentioned without undue self-consciousness.

Even this, however, is not enough for me and I have often wondered that a world which pretends to mark so many days and to celebrate so many occasions should accept quite so casually the day when *Hyla crucifer* announces that winter is over. One swallow does not make a spring, and the robin arrives with all the philistine unconcern of a worldling back from his Winter at Aiken or Palm Beach. But the peeper seems to realize, rather better than we, the significance of his resurrection, and I wonder if there is any other phenomenon in the heavens above or in the earth beneath which so simply and so definitely announces that life is resurgent again.

We who have kept artificially warm and active through the winter act as though we were really independent of the seasons, but we forget how brief our immunity is and are less anxious than we might be if habit had not dulled our awareness. One summer which failed to arrive and we should realize well enough before we perished of hunger that we are only a little less at the mercy of the seasons than the weed that dies in October. One winter which lasted not six months but twelve and we should recognize our affinity with the insects who give up the ghost after laying the eggs that would never hatch if they did not lie chill and dead through the cold of a winter as necessary to them as warmth was to the males who fertilized and the females who laid them. We waited through the long period during which our accumulated supplies of food grew smaller and we waited calmly in a blind assurance that warmth would return and that nature would reawaken. Now, the voice of the peeper from the marsh announces the tremendous fact that our faith has been justified. A sigh of relief should go up and men should look at one another with a wild surprise. "It" has happened again, though there was nothing during the long months that passed to support our conviction that it could and would.

We had, to be sure, the waiting pages of our calendars marked "June," "July," and even, of all things, "August." The sun, so the astronomers had assured us,

had turned northward on a certain date and theoretically had been growing stronger day by day. But there was, often enough, little in the mercury of our thermometers or the feel of our fingers to confirm the fact. Many a March day had felt colder than the milder days of February. And merely astronomical seasons have, after all, very little relation to any actual human experience either as visible phenomena or as events bringing with them concomitant earthly effects.

Not one man out of a hundred thousand would be aware of the solstices or the equinoxes if he did not see their dates set down in the almanac or did not read about them in the newspaper. They cannot be determined without accurate instruments and they correspond to no phenomena he is aware of. But the year as we live it does have its procession of recurring events, and it is a curious commentary on the extent to which we live by mere symbols that ten men know that the spring equinox occurs near the twenty-first of March to one who could give you even the approximate date when the peepers begin in his community; and that remains true even if he happens to be a countryman and even if he usually remarks, year after year, when they do begin.

It is true that the Day of the Peepers is a movable feast. But so is Easter, which—as a matter of fact—can come earlier or later by just about the same number of days that, on the calendar I have kept, separates the

earliest from the latest date upon which *Hyla crucifer* begins to call. Moreover, the earliness or the lateness of the peepers means something, as the earliness or the lateness of Easter does not.

Whatever the stars may say or whatever the sun's altitude may be, spring has not begun until the ice has melted and life begun to stir again. Your peeper makes a calculation which would baffle a meteorologist. He takes into consideration the maximum to which the temperature has risen, the minimum to which it has fallen during the night, the relative length of the warmer and the colder periods, besides, no doubt, other factors hard to get down in tables or charts. But at last he knows that the moment has come. It has been just warm enough just long enough, and without too much cold in between. He inflates the little bubble in his throat and sends out the clear note audible for half a mile. On that day something older than any Christian God has risen. The earth is alive again.

The human tendency to prefer abstractions to phenomena is, I know, a very ancient one. Some anthropologists, noting that abstract design seems usually to come before the pictorial representation of anything in primitive man's environment, have said that the first picture drawn by any beginning culture is a picture of God. Certainly in the European world astronomy was the first of the sciences, and it is curious to remember that men knew a great deal about the intricate dance

of the heavenly bodies before they had so much as noticed the phenomena of life about them. The constellations were named before any except the most obvious animals or plants and were studied before a science of botany or physiology had begun. The Greeks, who thought that bees were generated in the carcasses of dead animals and that swallows hibernated under the water, could predict eclipses, and the very Druids were concerned to mark the day on which the sun turned northward again. But the earliest of the sciences is also the most remote and the most abstract. The objects with which it deals are not living things and its crucial events do not correspond directly or immediately to any phenomena which are crucial in the procession of events as they affect animal or vegetable life.

Easter is an anniversary, and the conception of an anniversary is not only abstract but so difficult to define that the attempt to fix Easter used up an appalling proportion of the mental energy of learned men for many hundreds of years—ultimately to result in nothing except a cumbersome complexity that is absolutely meaningless in the end. Why should we celebrate the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the twenty-first of March? What possible meaning can the result of such a calculation have? Yet even that meaningless definition of Easter is not really accurate. For the purpose of determining the festival, the date of the full moon is assumed to be, not that of the actual full moon,

but that on which the full moon would have fallen if the table worked out by Pope Gregory's learned men had been—as it is not—really accurate. Even the relatively few men who remember the commonly given formula will occasionally find that they have missed their attempt to determine when Easter will be because they consulted a lay calendar to find the full moon instead of concerning themselves with the Epact and considering the theoretical ecclesiastical full moon rather than the actual one. How much easier it is to celebrate the Day of the Peepers instead, and how much more meaningful too! On that day something miraculous and full of promise has actually happened, and that something announces itself in no uncertain terms.

Over any astronomically determined festival, the Day of the Peepers has, moreover, another advantage even greater than the simplicity with which it defines itself or the actuality of its relation to the season it announces, for *Hyla crucifer* is a sentient creature who shares with us the drama and the exultation; who, indeed, sings our hosannahs for us. The music of the spheres is a myth; to say that the heavens rejoice is a pathetic fallacy; but there is no missing the rejoicings from the marsh and no denying that they are something shared. Under the stars we feel alone but by the pond side we have company.

To most, to be sure, Hyla is a *vox et praterea nihil.* Out of a thousand who have heard him, hardly one has

ever seen him at the time of his singing or recognized him if perchance he has happened by pure accident to see squatting on the branch of some shrub the tiny inch-long creature, gray or green according to his mood, and with a dark cross over his back. But it was this tiny creature who, some months before, had congregated with his fellows in the cold winter to sing and make love. No one could possibly humanize him as one humanizes a pet and so come to feel that he belongs to us rather than—what is infinitely more important—that we both, equally, belong to something more inclusive than ourselves.

Like all the reptiles and the amphibians he has an aspect which is inscrutable and antediluvian. His thoughts must be inconceivably different from ours and his joy hardly less so. But the fact is comforting rather than the reverse, for if we are nevertheless somehow united with him in that vast category of living things which is so sharply cut off from everything that does not live at all, then we realize how broad the base of the category is, how much besides ourselves is, as it were, on our side. Over against the atoms and the stars are set both men and frogs. Life is not something entrenched in man alone, in a creature who has not been here so very long and may not continue to be here so very much longer. We are not its sole guardians, not alone in enjoying or enduring it. It is not something that will fail if we should.

Strangely enough, however, man's development takes him farther and farther away from association with his fellows, seems to condemn him more and more to live with what is dead rather than with what is alive. It is not merely that he dwells in cities and associates with machines rather than with plants and with animals. That, indeed, is but a small and a relatively unimportant part of his growing isolation. Far more important is the fact that more and more he thinks in terms of abstractions, generalizations, and laws; less and less participates in the experience of living in a world of sights, and sounds, and natural urges.

Electricity, the most powerful of his servants, flows silently and invisibly. It isn't really there except in its effects. We plan our greatest works on paper and in adding machines. Push the button, turn the switch! Things happen. But they are things we know about only in terms of symbols and formulae. Do we inevitably, in the process, come ourselves to be more and more like the inanimate forces with which we deal, less and less like the animals among whom we arose? Yet it is of protoplasm that we are made. We cannot possibly become like atoms or like suns. Do we dare to forget as completely as we threaten to forget that we belong rejoicing by the marsh more anciently and more fundamentally than we belong by the machine or over the drawing board?

No doubt astronomy especially fascinated the first

men who began to think because the world in which they lived was predominantly so immediate and so confused a thing, was composed so largely of phenomena which they could see and hear but could not understand or predict and to which they so easily fell victim. The night sky spread out above them defined itself clearly and exhibited a relatively simple pattern of surely recurring events. They could perceive an order and impose a scheme, thus satisfying an intellectual need to which the natural phenomena close about them refused to cater.

But the situation of modern man is exactly the reverse. He "understands" more and more as he sees and hears less and less. By the time he has reached high-school age he has been introduced to the paradox that the chair on which he sits is not the hard object it seems to be but a collection of dancing molecules. He learns to deal, not with objects but with statistics, and before long he is introduced to the idea that God is a mathematician, not the creator of things seen, and heard, and felt. As he is taught to trust less and less the evidence of the five senses with which he was born, he lives less and less in the world which they seem to reveal, more and more with the concepts of physics and biology. Even his body is no longer most importantly the organs and muscles of which he is aware but the hormones of which he is told.

The very works of art that he looks at when he seeks

delight through the senses are no longer representations of what the eye has seen but constructions and designs —or, in other words, another order of abstractions. It is no wonder that for such a one spring should come, not when the peepers begin, but when the sun crosses the equator or rather—since that is only a human interpretation of the phenomenon—when the inclined axis of the earth is for an instant pointed neither toward nor away from the sun but out into space in such a way that it permits the sun's rays to fall upon all parts of the earth's surface for an equal length of time. For him astronomy does not, as it did for primitive man, represent the one successful attempt to intellectualize and render abstract a series of natural phenomena. It is, instead, merely one more of the many systems by which understanding is substituted for experience.

Surely one day a year might be set aside on which to celebrate our ancient loyalties and to remember our ancient origins. And I know of none more suitable for that purpose than the Day of the Peepers. "Spring is come!", I say when I hear them, and: "The most ancient of Christs has risen!" But I also add something which, for me at least, is even more important. "Don't forget," I whisper to the peepers; "we are all in this together."