

A White Heron

by Sarah Orne Jewett

The woods were filled with shadows one June evening just before eight o'clock. Light from a bright sunset shimmered against the trunks of trees. A little girl named Sylvia was leading her cow home. They were walking away from the light into the dark woods. But they both knew the path very well. It did not matter if they could not see it.

The old cow was stubborn, and smarter than you might have thought. There was hardly a night during the summer when it could be found in the pasture. Instead, it loved to wander far away. Then it would hide itself in the high bushes or among the trees. The cow wore a loud bell. But it discovered that if it stood perfectly still, the bell would not ring.

Then Sylvia had to hunt for the cow. She would call, "Cow! Cow!" over and over until she found it. If the creature had not given plenty of good milk, Sylvia might have grown angry. The truth was that Sylvia had lots of time.



And she had very little use to make of it. So when the weather was good, Sylvia enjoyed searching for the cow. Sylvia thought of it as a game of hide-and-peek. Since there were no children in the area, Sylvia played the game with enthusiasm.

This time, though, the game had lasted nearly three hours. The cow finally gave itself away with a shake of the bell. Sylvia just laughed when she came upon the animal at the edge of a swamp. Now Sylvia used a twig of birch leaves to urge the animal in the direction of home.

Sylvia wondered what her grandmother would say because they were so late. A long time had passed since she had left home. But everyone knew that finding the cow was sometimes difficult.

Her grandmother, Mrs. Tilley, had chased after the cow too many evenings to blame anyone else for being late. Mrs. Tilley suspected that



Sylvia took her time as she wandered about in the woods and meadows. Mrs. Tilley often said that there never was such a child for straying about out-of-doors. Still, Mrs. Tilley was grateful to have Sylvia's help. As for Sylvia, she felt that she had never been alive at all until she came to live on the farm.

Now Sylvia and the cow were on the shady path at the edge of the woods. The cow stopped at the brook to take a long drink. Sylvia stood still and waited. She let her bare feet cool themselves in the water. Large moths, blind in the fading light, struck softly against her. She waded through the brook as the cow moved on. She listened to the sounds around her with a heart that beat fast with pleasure.

There was a stirring in the tops of the trees. They were full of little birds and animals that seemed to be wide awake and going about their business. Sylvia, herself, felt sleepy as she walked along. However, they were not very far from the house now, and the air was soft and sweet.

Sylvia was not often in the woods as late as this. It made her feel as if she were part of the gray shadows and the flickering leaves. She was thinking how long it seemed since she first came to the farm a year ago. And she was wondering if things were the same in the busy, noisy town she had left.

Suddenly, she was shocked to hear a sharp whistling close by. Before she could take another step, a tall young man stepped onto the path.

"Hello," he called cheerfully. "How far is it to the main road?"

A trembling Sylvia answered softly, "A little way."

She did not dare to look straight at the stranger. He carried a gun over his shoulder. She just walked along and followed the cow. He walked alongside them.

"I have been hunting for some birds," the stranger said kindly. "And I have lost my way and need a friend very much. Don't be afraid," he added. "Speak up and tell me what your name is. I'd like to know if you think I can spend the night at your house. I want to go hunting early in the morning."

Sylvia was more alarmed than before. Would her grandmother think she was to blame? But who could have known this would happen? It did not seem to be her fault. Still, she might be blamed.

The stranger again asked her name. "My name is Sylvy," she managed to answer.

Mrs. Tilley was standing in the doorway when the three of them came into view. The cow gave a loud moo as if to explain everything.

"Where'd that silly cow hide this time, Sylvy?" asked her grandmother. But Sylvia, still nervous, kept silent.

The young man rested his gun next to the door. Then he wished Mrs. Tilley a good evening and repeated his story. He asked if he could have a night's lodging.

"Put me anywhere you like," he said. "I must be off early in the morning. But I am very hungry, indeed. Anything you might have to eat would do."

"Yes, of course," said Mrs. Tilley. "You might do better if you don't mind walking a mile or so on the main road. But you're welcome to what we've got. I'll find you something to eat right now. You make yourself at home. Now step round and set a plate for the gentleman, Sylvy."

Sylvia stepped promptly. She was glad to have something to do. And she was hungry herself.

Afterward, the gentleman said that this was the best supper he had eaten for a month. Then the three of them sat on the porch while the moon came up.

"Sylvia loves the countryside," grandmother Tilley was saying. "There's not a foot of this land she doesn't know. The wild creatures count her as one of their own. Squirrels come right over and eat out of her hands. The birds do that, too."

The guest suddenly seemed very interested. "So Sylvia knows all about birds, does she?" he exclaimed. "I have been collecting birds ever since I was a little boy. There are two or three very rare ones I have been hunting for the past five years. I mean to get them if they can be found."

"Do you put them in cages?" asked Mrs. Tilley.

"Oh, no. They're stuffed and preserved. I have dozens and dozens of them. And I have shot or caught every one of them myself. I caught a glimpse of a white heron three miles from here on Saturday. I followed it in this direction. They have never been found around here at all." He turned to

look at Sylvia. He was hoping that she had seen this rare bird.

But Sylvia was watching a toad hopping in the path.

"You would know the white heron if you saw it," the stranger went on eagerly. "It's a funny, tall, white bird with soft feathers and long, thin legs. And it would have a nest, perhaps at the top of a high tree."

Sylvia's heart skipped a beat. She had seen that strange, white bird. She had once crept softly near where it stood on some green swamp grass. That was way over at the other side of the woods.

"I can't think of anything I would like more than finding that heron's nest," the handsome stranger was saying. "I would give a hundred dollars to anybody who could show it to me. And I plan to spend my whole vacation hunting for it, if necessary."

Mrs. Tilley seemed very interested in all this. But Sylvia silently watched the toad. Later, no matter how she tried, she could not count in her mind the treasures that one hundred dollars would buy.

The next day, the young man wandered about the woods. Sylvia kept him company. She had lost her first fear of the stranger. He told her many things about the birds. And he gave her a pocketknife. She thought of it as a treasure.

Sylvia would have liked him much better without his gun. She could not understand why he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much. Still, she watched him with admiration. She had never seen anyone so charming. The woman's heart, asleep in the child, was somehow thrilled by a dream of love. At last, evening began to fall, and they walked home together.

Half a mile from home, on a high piece of land, stood a tall pine tree. Sylvia had often put her hands on its trunk and looked up at its branches. She had always believed that whoever climbed to the top could see the ocean. Now she thought about the tree. She was filled with excitement. For if she climbed it at dawn, she could see the whole world. She could easily see where the white heron flew. She could watch it closely and find its hidden nest.

What a spirit of adventure! What glory when she later told the secret! It was almost too much for her heart to bear.



Sylvia could not sleep that night. Before morning came, she stole out of the house. She crossed the path through the woods and hurried to the high ground.

There was the huge tree. It was still asleep in the pale moonlight. Sylvia bravely began to climb to the top of it. The way was harder than she thought. She must reach far and hold tightly. The sharp branches caught and held her. They scratched her like angry claws. Still she went higher and higher.

The tree seemed to grow taller and taller as she went up. Still she climbed. Then, finally, she was at the top.

Yes, there was the sea. There were the woodlands and farms. There were churches and white villages. Truly it was a **vast** and enormous world.

The birds sang louder and louder. At last the sun came up. Sylvia could see the white sails of ships at sea. Where was the white heron's nest?

Sylvia looked down toward the green swamp. She had seen it there once. She would see it again. Then look! Look! She saw the white bird rising up like a floating feather. She saw it glide past the pine tree. She saw it come to rest on the branch of a pine tree near her own. She could see its nest!

Satisfied, Sylvia made her way down the tree. She did not dare to look below the branch she stood on. Her fingers ached. She feared she would slip. But over and over, she wondered what the stranger would say. What would he think when she told him how to find his way to the heron's nest?

"Sylvy! Sylvy!" called Mrs. Tilley again and again that morning. But nobody answered. The bed was empty. Sylvia had disappeared.

The guest awoke from a dream and began to dress himself. He thought about the shy little girl. He remembered the way she looked once or twice yesterday. He was sure from those looks that she had seen the white heron. And now she must be persuaded to tell.

Here she comes now, plainer than ever. Her old dress is torn and **tattered** and dirty. The grandmother and the stranger stand in the door. They question her. And now the great moment has come! The time has come to speak of the heron's nest!

But Sylvia does not speak at all. Her grandmother scolds her. And the young man's eyes are looking straight into her own. He can make Sylvia and her grandmother rich with money! He has promised it, and they are poor! He waits to hear the story she has to tell.

No. She keeps silent. What is it that suddenly stops her from telling?

She remembers standing in the green branches. She remembers how the white heron came floating, like a feather, through the golden air. She remembers how they watched the sea together. And Sylvia cannot speak.

She cannot tell the heron's secret. She cannot give its life away.

GETTING THE MEANING OF THE STORY. Complete each of the following sentences by putting an *x* in the box next to the correct answer. Each sentence helps you get the meaning of the story.

1. When Sylvia first saw the stranger, she was
 a. pleased because she wanted company.
 b. eager to invite him to her home.
 c. frightened by him.
2. The stranger asked Mrs. Tilley if
 a. he could stay for the night.
 b. she could suggest a place to stay nearby.
 c. she had seen any rare birds in the neighborhood.
3. Sylvia discovered where the heron's nest was by
 a. setting a trap for the heron.
 b. climbing a tall tree and seeing where the heron flew.
 c. hiding near the swamp and watching the heron.
4. At the end of the story, Sylvia
 a. asked the stranger for a hundred dollars.
 b. told her grandmother about how she had spent the morning.
 c. kept silent.

× 5 =
NUMBER CORRECT YOUR SCORE

REVIEWING STORY ELEMENTS. Each of the following questions reviews your understanding of story elements. Put an *x* in the box next to the correct answer to each question.

1. What happened last in the *plot* of the story?
 a. Sylvia urged the cow in the direction of home.
 b. The stranger gave Sylvia a pocketknife.
 c. Sylvia slipped out of the house and headed for the pine tree.
2. Which statement best *characterizes* Sylvia?
 a. She loved the out-of-doors and nature.
 b. She missed life in the busy, noisy town.
 c. She didn't like the creatures of the forest.
3. What is the *setting* of "A White Heron"?
 a. a crowded village
 b. a farm and the countryside near it
 c. a garden in the country
4. Which sentence best tells the *theme* of the story?
 a. A young girl decides to give up a large reward to save the life of a beautiful bird.
 b. A young girl reveals a secret, and is rewarded with much money.
 c. A young girl disappears from home and makes her grandmother very angry.

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NUMBER CORRECT YOUR SCORE

EXAMINING VOCABULARY WORDS. Answer the following vocabulary questions by putting an *x* in the box next to the correct answer. The vocabulary words are printed in **boldface** in the story. If you wish, look back at the words before you answer the questions.

- Sylvia used a twig of birch leaves to urge the cow in the direction of home. A *twig* is a
 - a. long metal pole.
 - b. small branch.
 - c. bunch of flowers.
- The light from the sunset shimmered against the tree trunks. The word *shimmered* means
 - a. gleamed, or shone, brightly.
 - b. bothered or annoyed.
 - c. lifted or raised.
- From the tree, Sylvia saw a vast and enormous world. What is the meaning of the word *vast*?
 - a. huge
 - b. ugly
 - c. dangerous
- When Sylvia finished climbing the tree, her dress was torn and tattered. The word *tattered* means
 - a. new.
 - b. beautiful.
 - c. ragged.

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ADDING WORDS TO A PASSAGE. Complete the following paragraph by filling in each blank with one of the words listed in the box below. Each of the words appears in the story. Since there are five words and four blanks, one word in the group will not be used.

The heron is a very interesting

_____ . It has a long neck, long _____ , and a long, sharp beak.

The bones in a heron's neck are not all the _____ size. Therefore when the heron flies, it _____ holds its neck in the shape of the letter S.

bird	always
same	
pasture	legs

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 NUMBER CORRECT YOUR SCORE

THINKING ABOUT THE STORY. Each of the following questions will help you to think critically about the selection. Put an *x* in the box next to the correct answer.

- Sylvia knew that if she told the stranger where the heron's nest was, then
 - a. her grandmother would be upset.
 - b. the stranger would never visit them again.
 - c. the heron would be killed.
- Which one of the following statements is true?
 - a. Sylvia had climbed the tall pine tree many times before.
 - b. The stranger was sure that Sylvia had seen the heron.
 - c. The stranger began collecting birds a short time ago.
- Clues in the story suggest that the stranger was glad to stay at Mrs. Tilley's house because he
 - a. had seen the white heron heading in that direction.
 - b. could not afford to stay anywhere else.
 - c. had stayed there before and found it comfortable.
- When the stranger left, he probably felt
 - a. amused.
 - b. satisfied.
 - c. disappointed.

× 5 =
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Thinking More about the Story. Your teacher might want you to write your answers.

- Sylvia planned to tell the stranger where the heron's nest was. Then she changed her mind. Explain why. Give at least two reasons.
- At the end of the story, it must have been very difficult for Sylvia to have remained silent. Give reasons to support this statement.
- The stranger would have been willing to give Sylvia five hundred dollars to tell him where the heron's nest was. Do you agree? Explain your answer.

Use the boxes below to total your scores for the exercises.

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