CHARLES ABBOTT

OUTINGS AT ODD TIMES

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Abbott C.

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Содержание

Charles Conrad Abbott
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PREFATORY

Nature, and Books about it

Often, during a long and dusty walk in midsummer, I have chanced suddenly upon a wayside spring, and stooping drank directly from the bosom of Mother Earth. Filled with the pleasant recollections of such moments, how tame is all other tipple, even though the crystal is a marvel of art, with "beady bubbles winking at the brim"!

So, too, I find it with matters of graver import. I would that no one should aid me in gathering my stores, but with my own hands I would delve at the fountain-head. The spirit of such an aim is a spur to youth, but becomes a source of amusement rather than a more serious matter in our maturer years. I am more than willing now to take nature at second hand. But is this safe? How far can we trust another's eyes, ears, and sense of touch and smell? There are critics scattered as thickly as motes in a sunbeam, veritable know-alls, who shriek "Beware!" when nature is reported; but, for all this, outdoor books are very tempting to a host of people, and in the long run educate rather than misinform. That ever two naturalists should wholly agree, after careful study of an animal, is not probable. There will be the same differences as exist between two translations of the same book. What a crow, a mouse, or a gorgeous cluster of blooming lotus is to me, these will never be to another; but, because of this, do not persist that your neighbor is blind, deaf, or stupid. I recently had a horse ask me to let down the bars; to another it would have been merely the meaningless fact that the horse neighed.

Having an outdoor book in hand, when and how should it be read? It is no doubt very tempting to think of a shady nook, or babbling brook, or both, in connection with the latest outdoor volume. Possibly, as you start out for a quiet day, you string together a bit of rhyme concerning the book, as Leigh Hunt did and others have done since. It is a common practice to carry a book into the fields, but not a logical one. How can a book, even one of outdoor topics, compete with Nature? Certainly if Nature is to the reader but a convenient room, a lighter and more airy one than any at home, does it not signify a serious lack in the mind of that person? From a notice of a recent publication I clip the following: "A capital book to slip into one's pocket when taking an outing." If, because of its size, it could be readily slipped into one's pocket, then it was a capital way of getting rid of it. What sort of an outing can one have who reads all the while? Is not the cloud-flecked sky something more than a ceiling, the surrounding hills more than mere walls, the grass and flowers more than carpet? There is one pleasure even greater than that of reading, and that is being out of doors. To read at such a time seems to imply one of two things: either that the reader knows Nature thoroughly, or is indifferent to such knowledge. The former phenomenon the world has never seen; the latter, to speak mildly, deserves our pity. To escape ridicule, which is something, to insure happiness, which is more, to avoid great dangers, which is of even greater importance, one must know something of Nature. In one sense she is our persistent foe. She mantles with inviting cover of rank grass her treacherous quicksands; she paints in tempting colors her most poisonous fruits; she spreads unheralded the insidious miasma from the meadow and the swamp; but neither the quicksand, the unwholesome fruit, nor noxious vapors is an unmixed evil. Let us take them as they are, see them as parts and parcels of a complete whole, and each hour of every outing is an unclouded joy. Nature never excuses our ignorance.

Whatever one's position in life, does a knowledge of Nature prove unneeded? Should we not know that potatoes grow beneath the sod, as well as apples grow upon trees? Gather a crowd at random

on the streets, or corner a half-dozen at some social gathering, and how many can tell you the life-history of a mushroom or a truffle? “Do potatoes grow upon bushes?” was asked not long since. This was positively painful, but worse things have happened. A young lady, from a city renowned for its schools, startled her country cousins by asking, while toying with an ear of corn, “Which end, when you plant, do you put in the ground, the blunt or the pointed one?” If botany is impracticable in the curriculum of the public schools, ought not, at least, the natural history of our common articles of food to be taught? Can not such ignorance as this implied be banished from the land?

But I have wandered; let us come back to books. If books, even those descriptive of nature, are out of place in the woods, meadows, or by the brook-side, when should they be read? Clearly, when the scenes they treat of are not accessible. Why should we be entertained with a description of a bird or flower, when they are both before us? It seems incredible that any one should be better pleased with another’s impressions, however cunningly told, than with those of his own senses. It is a strange mental condition that can delight in the story of a bird, and yet have no desire to see the creature; to be a witness to all the marvelous cunning that this bird exhibits. Few are those among us whose outings cover a lifetime; and when the happy days of freedom come to us, let books be kept behind, and with untrammeled eyes and ears let us drink in the knowledge that comes to us at no other time. Summer is all too short a season for other occupation than enthusiastic sight-seeing and sound-hearing.

Long before autumn most of us must be back to the busy town. Business demands our work-day hours; and now, during the leisure of long winter evenings, with what delight one may recall vacation-days, reading outdoor books! The library now becomes the mountain, lake, or river. With Thoreau, Burroughs, or Jeffries at hand, one can hear the summer birds in the shrill whistle of the wind, and the babbling of summer brooks in the rattle of icy rain.

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C. C. A.
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PART I
IN WINTER

A Winter Sunrise

The waning moon was scarcely visible in the western sky and not a star shone overhead, when I ventured out of doors, at the call of the gathering crows. These noisy scavengers of the river's shore had evidently slept with one eye open, and at the first faint glimmering of the dawn signaled, in no uncertain tones, the coming day. Across the brown meadows floated their clamorous cries and roused me when my own slumber was most profound; but I responded promptly, willing at least, if not wildly anxious, to witness a winter sunrise.

I have said the meadows were brown; such was their color when I saw them last; but now, every wrinkled blade of last year's grass was daintily feathered with pearly frost. A line, too, of steel-gray crystals topped every rail of the old worm fence, and capped the outreaching branches of the scattered trees. The glint of splintered glass filled the landscape.

Knowing the view would there be least obstructed, I walked leisurely to a high knoll in the lower meadows, leaving a curiously dark streak behind me where I brushed away the frost as I passed. Not a bird greeted me. The sparrows and chickadees of yesterday were still asleep. The crackling of brittle twigs beneath my feet was the only sound I heard, save, of course, the blended voices of the distant crows. The brightening of the eastern sky proceeded slowly. Cloud above cloud threatened to shut out the light until the day had well advanced; while from the river rose a filmy bank of smoke-like fog that settled in huge masses over the intervening marshes. But still the crows were clamorous, and I had been told that their songs at sunrise augured a fair day; so, 'twixt hope and fear, I reached the high knoll in my neighbor's meadow. It was at the nick of time. Without a heralding ray in the whole horizon, a flood of rosy light leaped through a rift in the clouds and every cold gray crystal of the frost glowed with ruddy warmth. Then deafening loud was the din of the foraging crows, as though they exulted at the fullfillment of their prediction; and from that moment on, the day was beautiful.

And if crows could be so enthusiastic over a bright winter day, why not other birds? What of that host of arctic finches that tarry with us until spring? I listened in vain for the foxie sparrow's warble, the call of the Peabody bird, and whistling of the purple finch. These were all here yesterday and making merry; now every one was mute. The ceaseless cawing of the crows may have drowned their voices, but I think not. However, in other ways and no less cheerful ones, the vivifying effect of sunrise was soon apparent everywhere about me.

My friends, the meadow mice, were in their glory. Their grass-walled runways were roofed with ice, and not a breath of the chilly breeze that fretted the outer world could reach them. I quite forgot the increasing beauty of the eastern sky in my eagerness to watch the mice. I could look down upon them, through the transparent roofs of their crystal palaces, and wonder what might be their errands. Every one was in a hurry, and none stopped to nibble at a blade of grass or tarried at a cluster of seed-pods. Was it the mere pleasure of activity that prompted them? It was very warm beneath the ice and far from cold above it. But all the while I might be frightening the poor creatures, so I withdrew, at the thought, to the cover of a clump of bushes. Quiet then seemed partially restored, and soon one mouse came from an opening in the roof, where many runways met. It picked its painful way over the frost, as though every crystal was a pricking needle. I moved and away it darted, but not to tell its fellows. Another and another came, and, like the one first seen, they simply ran from post to pillar and back from pillar to post. Perhaps a weasel was on their track – but, if we commence

surmising, there will never be an end to it. Let me declare dogmatically, these mice were taking a sun bath, and with this thought, leave them.

As I looked about me, the crows again became the most prominent feature of the landscape. They hovered in a loose flock over all the meadows; literally, in thousands, and as the rays of the sun struck them, they too glistened as though the frost crystals had incased their feathers. Higher and higher they rose into the misty air and soon dispersed in every direction; but they will gather again as the day closes, for over the river, somewhere in the woods, they have a roosting-place. I have seen this knoll, now thickly tenanted by mice, black with crows, day after day, within a fortnight. What then became of the mice? Surely their cunning stood them well in need to escape these ravenous birds, and yet they have done so. Stupid as they seem when studied individually, these mice must have a modicum of mother-wit, to thrive in spite of so many odds against them.

But now, as the day advanced, the wooded bluff a mile away and the willows on the river-shore gave evidence that not alone were the crows and mice awake to the beauty and warmth of a winter sunrise. The feathered world was now astir and music from a hundred throats filled the crisp air. There was, it is true, not that volume of sound that greets the daybreak in June, and no one voice was as tuneful as a thrush. This mattered not. The essential feature of a pleasant stroll, evidence that I was not alone, was present; for I can not keep company with meadow mice. I call it a dead day, when there are no birds, and he who would know what such a day is should be on the marshes or the river when not a sound rises from the wild waste about him.

I stood long listening to the afar-off choir, and then, turning my steps homeward, fancied I could distinguish the different birds that now made the woods fairly ring. There was a ditch to cross before reaching the hillside, and right glad am I that I looked before leaping it, for I saw a lazy frog slowly responding to the increasing warmth of the sunshine. All night long this creature had been sleeping in a cosy nook, a foot deep in the soft mud which was protected here from the north and west and has never been known to freeze. One eye and a small fraction of the frog's head were visible, but the former was bright, and I was sure that no accident had happened to bring it even so far above the surface. I stood very still, expecting much, but it was like watching the hour-hand of a clock. In time the whole head was exposed, then the fore-limbs, and this, for many minutes, was the extent of the frog's activity. I ventured finally to assist, and lifting up the clammy creature, placed it on a floating fence rail, whereon the sun shone as in summer. The frog was happy. Its expression showed this, its pulsing sides proved it, and could I have heard it croak, my own satisfaction would have been complete; but this it would not do. But let it be remembered, the croaking can not be forced, either in June or January, and the voices of frogs have been heard frequently during the latter month. Even when the winter has been very severe, a typical January thaw has led them to give tongue, to croak unmistakably, although in thinner tones than during a summer's night chorus.

There were hours yet before noon, and my little adventure with the languid frog prompted me to explore the ditch in a rude way. All forms of aquatic life seemed as active as in spring. Fish, salamanders, snakes, turtles, and insects, were not only active but alert, and as difficult to capture as I had ever found them. Actual sluggishness characterized the frogs only, and yet these creatures are supposed to be less susceptible to cold than all the others. The truth is, the winter habits of every form of life are little known, and what impressions, if any, most have upon the subject are more or less erroneous. We have had no winter as yet, but the same conditions that I found to-day were true of the ditch-dwellers last year and the year before, when we had not only winter, but winter intensified.

I did not enumerate the many birds aright as I approached the hillside. My attention was suddenly called from the ditch to the green-brier thicket beyond by a familiar sound, yet which now, late in January, seemed quite out of place if not out of tune and harsh. It was the querulous cry of a cat-bird. This familiar thrush is no *rara avis* at such a time, although probably in Audubon's day few if any remained in New Jersey during the winter. No author makes mention, I believe, of such an occurrence. The number seen each winter gradually increases, and the disposition to remain affects

apparently these birds over a steadily extending area. So, at least, from correspondence, I am led to believe.

I found but three flowers as I neared my home – a dandelion, a violet, and a pale spring beauty; but earlier in the month, a friend had been more successful, and gathered not only those I have named, but others. Doubtless these superlatively early blossomings have to do with the present extraordinary winter, now more than half gone, but not altogether, perhaps. Many a plant is more vigorous than we suspect, and stray flowers are hidden beneath the fallen leaves more often than we know.

When, in the forbidding gloom of a winter dawn, I ventured out of doors, it was with the anticipation of a cheerless walk, if not fear of actual discomfort; but the brilliant sunrise promptly dispelled all this, my fears giving way to hopes that were more than realized.

Midwinter Minstrelsy

It is a common impression, I find, that when the Northern song-birds come in autumn from Canada to the Middle and Southern States, they leave their music behind them, and during their sojourn here they only chirp and twitter at best, and far oftener are moody and silent. This absurdity is not readily explained, unless it be that lovers of birds are persistently indoors from November until May. I do not pretend to say that a keen, cold, frosty morning is rendered the more charming by reason of the best efforts of the winter wren, purple finch, or white-crowned sparrow, but that not one of them is necessarily mute because the mercury is down to zero. Indeed, temperature alone seems to have almost nothing to do with the movements or habits generally of our birds, either the resident or migratory species. All depends upon the food-supply, and a feast in winter is followed by a merry heart as surely as a successful wooing in May results in ecstatic song. I think this is borne out by the fact that during the present season – as yet winter only in name – there has been really less activity and disposition on the part of all our birds to sing than when we have had snow and ice in abundance. I worked my way recently through a tangled, trackless bit of swamp, and, while climbing over the prostrate trunk of a huge tree, startled a winter wren as it crept from beneath a smaller log near by. It seemed as astonished that I should have ventured so far from the open meadow as I was to see any bird less mopish than an owl. The wren stood contemplating me for at least one minute – a long time for a wren to remain in one spot – and then gave vent to its astonishment by, not a chirp, but a short series of sweet notes, that well repaid me for my recent labors. Then, darting into the thicket, the wren was gone, but I was not left alone. At the same moment, a troop of tree-sparrows settled upon the clustered water-birches, and their united voices rose to the dignity of a bird's song. Such it evidently was intended to be, for the chattering of birds, when they merely chirp or twitter – which is but their conversation – is never so softly modulated, but pitched in a hundred different keys. This became noticeable directly afterward, for the birds scattered among the undergrowth, and the short, quick utterances that I soon continually heard bore no resemblance to the two or three notes, which, before they had separated, they uttered in concert.

And as I returned home, while crossing a wide meadow where the rank grasses afforded excellent cover, I found many small brown birds that ran through them as aimlessly as frightened mice; they were titlarks, as it proved. None sang until I was near at hand, when one after the other rose a short distance from the ground, flew a few feet, and uttered, while on the wing, a sharp, but bell-like note that was truly musical. Another and another started up, at almost every step, but only to alight again directly. At times there were four or five in sight at once, and then their united voices sounded sweetly in the still air. Quickening my steps, the flock finally rose in a body, and, so fitful and irregular was their progress, had there been a stiff breeze at the time they might have been mistaken for drifting autumn leaves. I need not pursue this feature of winter bird life further, so far as the migratory species are concerned; but a word with reference to those birds which are here throughout the year – the resident species. The robin, Carolina wren, song-sparrow, and thistle-bird sing, I am sure, with unabated ardor, in spite of the cold. A miserably damp, foggy, or even windy day has a depressing effect, and at such a time I usually find the woods, meadows, and the river shore quite silent, unless, indeed, there be crows in abundance. During the last week in January, 1889, when much of the time there was a chilly northwest wind and often a clouded sky, the song-sparrows thronged the willow hedges, and sang their May-day melodies. I heard them soon after sunrise, at midday, and once after the sun had gone down and it was fast growing dark.

There is yet another feature of bird music which is characteristic of winter – the singing of passing flocks when high in the air. Day after day, of late, soon after sunrise, a merry company of bluebirds fly over the house, and each one sings as he passes by. Toward sunset they return to the cedar and pine woods across the river, and then, too, they may be heard. Their movements are as

regular as those of the crows that roost somewhere in the same neighborhood. I have often failed to see them, they flew at so great an elevation, but their song is not to be confounded with that of any other bird; nor are they like the chats – ventriloquists. Somewhere in the upper regions they were floating along, and their music, drifting earthward, brightens the winter landscape until we think of early spring. But the bluebirds are not always so unsociable. There is a rick of cornstalks not far away, about which I find a pair almost daily, and did not the pestiferous house-sparrows worry them so much, I am sure they would sing more frequently. They appear to realize that their songs may be heard, and so bring down upon them an attack; so, if they warble at all, it is very softly, as though not quite discouraged, and hopeful of better times. They have held their little fort, however, since early autumn, and I am in hopes will outwit their enemies when nesting time arrives.

No, it is not true that the country is desolate, even in midwinter. I heard a bluebird sing during the great storm of March, 1888, and since then have been hopeful, although for more than one mile, during my recent outings, comparative silence reigned. And now, what of to-day, the last one of the month? I heard the crested tit whistling in the far-off woods before the sun had risen, and not less musical was the distant cawing of the myriad crows that were just leaving their roost. Overhead, in the tops of the tall pines, were nuthatches and chicadees, and shortly after a host of pine finches. They were all fretting, as I fancied, because the wide reaches of meadow near by were still shut from view, but it was not harsh scolding, after all; and as the day brightened, their voices cleared, until later, when the birds had scattered among the hedges, they all sang sweetly; for at such a time the ear is not critical, and even the plaint of the nuthatch is not out of tune. On and on I walked, expecting in the wilder woods and about the marshy meadows to find birds and birds – many that sang and others that would interest by virtue of their ways. I confidently looked for the host of winter finches and the overstaying herons, but I saw none, heard none. By noon the whole country was sadly silent, and not even a crow passed by. Yet the day was perfect; save a little cooler, it was typical Indian-summer weather. Plant life responded to the inviting sunshine, and I gathered violets and spring beauty. Even the saxifrage shone through the brown leaves, its white buds almost unfolded. It is in vain to conjecture what had become of the birds of the early morning. Let it suffice to say that I was greatly disappointed, and had I not been astir so very early would have been the more sorely puzzled. As it was, the birds had not utterly forsaken us, and proved in their own way and in their own time that midwinter minstrelsy is not a myth.

A Cold Wave

When Mr. Isaac Norris, of Philadelphia, merchant and man of observation, recorded the weather in the vicinity of that city, 1749 and earlier, he did not mention “cold waves,” as such, but remarked that there was greater irregularity then than formerly, adding the significant statement, “at present it is warm, even the very next day after a severe cold, and sometimes the weather changes several times a day.”

Whether since 1749 these sudden changes of temperature have become more frequent or not, I have no satisfactory means of determining, but am inclined to think such to be the case; but new or old as a meteorological freak, a cold wave is worthy of the rambler’s study, in spite of the discomforts sure to be encountered, for it necessarily affects all animal life that was astir before it reached us. Yesterday, there were birds in the woods and about the meadows; even spiders had spread their webs in the sunny glades, and stray flies hummed in the sheltered hollows of the hill; so that thoughts of an early spring came continually to the fore, as I watched and listened to the busy life about me, myself reclining at full length, on a prostrate tree.

Had there been no intimation of the cold wave’s coming in the morning paper, it would have been suspected as on its way, for all day the barometer was suspiciously low, and soon after sunset a faint moaning in the chimney corner and a far shriller sound among the tree-tops suggested a coming change. The sudden up-leaping of sparks, too, from the back-log counts for something. For an hour or more the coals had been red or purple and scarcely a flame, however small, shot from the glowing mass; then, at the whisper of the fretful wind, suddenly long trains of brilliant sparks flew upward, and again, both the back-log and the black fore-sticks were ablaze. Doubtless, in the good old times, this never passed unnoticed and every one ventured a prediction when there was no likelihood of erring. So he who spake first, in the days of our grandfathers, became the greater weather-prophet.

During the night the cold wave came. As I write, we are having the first ice-making weather of the season, although February is well advanced. The chill, gray clouds scarcely concealed the sun as it rose, and later, when the sky was clear, a rosy blush tinted the drifted snow upon the fields. What now of the busy birds, the spiders, and humming flies of yesterday? Have they folded their tents like Arabs and silently disappeared?

Facing the north wind, I pushed through brake and brier, listening at every step for the chirp of a startled bird. For some time I neither saw nor heard a living creature, nor, indeed, did I wonder at their absence. At last a solitary crow struggled against the fierce wind and uttered at times a most melancholy plaint. It was all but sufficient to send me home, and I stood for a moment pitifully undecided; but the crow, I saw, did make some headway, and I took a hint of it. The icy gusts that swept the hillside soon forced me, however, to seek shelter, and I crept for some distance along the bed of a deep dry ditch overhung by blackberry canes and smilax. Here I found a more spring-like temperature, and was not surprised when from the clusters of dead grass blue jays hopped before me. They were evidently startled at my appearance in their snug retreat, but still were not timid, as when in the open woods. I often approached within a few paces, and they hid, I am sure, in the tangled vines and bushes on the banks of the ditch, instead of flying out into the meadow. But if jays, there should be other birds I thought, and I stopped again and again to listen. It was the same old story – nothing was to be heard but the roar of the wind overhead. Weary at last with creeping through such cramped quarters, I sat down to rest at a convenient point, and never have I been so fortunate in the choice of an outlook.

It is clearly evident that our resident birds and mammals soon know every nook and corner of their chosen haunts, and more, that they pass from point to point in accordance with fixed plans and do not wander aimlessly about. If you overtake in broad daylight, as sometimes happens, any animal larger than a mouse, it is not likely to be confused, not knowing which way to turn. Such indecision

would invariably prove fatal. Their actions under such circumstances indicate full knowledge of their surroundings, and convince one of this fact. If not true, then every surprised animal must take in at a glance every tree, burrow, ditch, and path, and select between them, in the twinkling of an eye. My own observations lead me to conclude that our mammals, which are largely nocturnal, survey at night the whole country and know every inch of the ground. Every tanglewood is to them a city with its main thoroughfares and side alleys, and it is this knowledge that enables them to outwit their foes. Within a few days, a skunk came boldly into the yard, in broad daylight; defied the dog by assuming a bold front, and was making for the only near place of safety within easy reach, when in the yard, an opening under a side porch. By mere accident only it was run down and killed. This dreaded creature had evidently been belated, and coming home after sunrise used wonderful tactics when it encountered the dog. It played with him. It ran this way and that, but never far, and always faced the half-timid mastiff. It shook its huge tail, bristled its long fur, snapped, squeaked, and all the while approached in short stages the porch. At last, seeing more than an even chance of reaching it, the cunning creature bolted, and I am almost sorry that it did not escape.

So, too, with our birds. Not all of them act upon foreknowledge of a coming cold wave, and temporarily migrate. On the other hand, had they no places of refuge, the majority would perish. No bird could have weathered the cold cutting winds that prevailed last night, with the air, too, at times, filled with stinging sleet. Yet, hunt the country over, after such a night, and how seldom will you find a dead bird lying upon the ground. Even after such a storm as the historic blizzard of a year ago, birds that had succumbed through exposure, were comparatively few. The fact that the alien sparrows in our cities were destroyed in large numbers, strengthens my previous assertion, for they, unlike wild life, are largely deprived of the advantage of snug harbors, such as the country affords our native birds; and their semi-domesticated condition has rendered them less provident and observing. Such, at least, was the tenor of my thoughts while resting in my sheltered outlook.

Before many minutes had elapsed the expected chirping of winter finches was heard; at first in the distance, but directly almost overhead; then, everywhere about me. A moment later, and a dozen were in full view. Myself, a shapeless mass upon a mossy log, the birds mistook me for a part of it, and I had but to look and listen. Foxie sparrows threaded the tangled maze of vine and cane, singing a few sweet notes at times, as the wind lulled and the warm sunshine flooded the shelter with a brighter glow; white-throats warbled in their listless way, and one fearless winter wren peered into every cranny of the hollowed earth, spider-hunting wherever the waters of the last freshet had caverned the overhanging banks. As it drew near, I almost held my breath, hoping it would venture to creep over me. Once it came very near, stopped and looked me squarely in the face, but without its suspicions being aroused. Probably I needed but a few cobwebs to have brought it even closer.

For long the light-hearted birds, in joyous mood, passed up and down this hidden highway, often within arm's reach, and not one recognized me. It was much like being alone in a strange city, where the feeling of desolate isolation can best be realized. Much as I might desire it, I could in no sense become a part of the happy world about me. Here, at times, is the shadow that rests upon the rambler's path – to feel that at best he is but tolerated, and to know that had these happy creatures the power they would drive him into the bleak world beyond.

One interesting feature of bird life was to-day very apparent. Never did two or more individuals meet upon the same twig but a low, scarcely audible twitter was uttered. I could often see a slight movement of the beak, without hearing a sound, and notice a gentle tremor of the wings, that doubtless meant much to them, but can not be interpreted by us. Then away they would go, following the line of the long ditch without grazing the tiniest twig that bent above them. Why many a sparrow, apparently in reckless haste, did not come to grief, is indeed a puzzle; for never, I thought, had I found thorns so sharp, so slender, and so thickly set.

But not birds alone had sought shelter here; the mice also had been driven from the wind-swept meadows, and these ventured into the sunlight, but were cautious to a marked degree. None came very

near, and when I was in full view they stopped, sat upon their haunches and felt sure, if I correctly read their thoughts, that all was not quite right. Not one passed by me. Their keen noses detected what the proverbially keen sight of the birds had failed to discover, that I was not a harmless bit of driftwood. Or did the sense of hearing catch the sound of my breathing? Explain it as one may, meadow-mice were never before so knowing, and I recall the charge that I have often made, that they are stupid.

So here I sat for two whole hours, yet not aware that so long a time had elapsed. It mattered nothing that the fierce wind raged above me; that the bending oaks echoed its heartless boast:

> "I come from the fields of the frozen north,
> O'er the waste of the trackless sea,
> Where the winter sun looks wearily forth,
> And yieldeth his strength to me."

This lessened not my comfort nor quickened my homeward steps. Wrapping my cloak the closer, I recalled the day's adventures as I withdrew, thinking how true it was that pleasant surprises are ever in store for the earnest rambler and many a loss for him who is faint-hearted. It is not well to judge the world through a window.

The Woods in Winter

When I walk in the woods in summer I think of the trees as a shelter. They go to form a protection alike against the sun and passing shower. And if I turn from the old cart-path it is but to enter some one-side compartment of a great labyrinth of rooms. No one tree calls for observation. They are as the inner walls of a great house, and what they surround alone commands attention. It is going out of doors as much to leave the thick woods as to pass from your dwelling. But now, during December's bright, cheery, winter days, every tree in these same woods becomes my companion. We are exposed to the same sunny sky, and as I wander from one to another, each has its pleasant greeting for me. This has been a life-long fancy of mine. Walk up to a century-old oak, and how promptly it speaks to you of giant strength and sturdy independence; turn then to a stately liquidambar and you are greeted with exquisite grace. I can point out in the old woods here at home the counterparts of many a man I know. The lonely wild apple on a gravelly knoll is as crabbed as my crusty neighbor who begrudges me a few flint arrow-heads. I think I should be soured by wandering half a day in a forest of wild-apple trees. There is no such feeling when with the oaks, beeches, chestnuts, and silver birch. They recall no unfortunates among one's acquaintance. Every tree of them is content with the world as it finds it, and so too am I when surrounded by them.

The woods were quiet when I entered. Not a twig trembled, and the dead leaves were too limp to crackle beneath my feet. Dainty frost crystals were plentifully strown over the dwarfed bushes by the roadside, and a film of glittering ice with jagged sides reached out from the banks of a little brook near by. Nowhere did the ice reach wholly across the stream, and so was the more beautiful by reason of the inky waters that flowed sluggishly beneath it.

Where, about the roots of a massive beech, the brook had become a little pool, I stood for many minutes, alternately watching the waters that here seemed roused to a semblance of activity, and then listening to the welcome cawing of the over-flying crows. Brooks, birds, and trees! Your choice of such good company, and yet there are those who would have gone mad here from loneliness! For the time I gave heed to the brook, wondering as usual what might be beneath the surface, and all the while, as ever happens, the creatures of the brook were wondering about myself. If one turns to the text-books he will find much said of the instinct that leads the lower forms of life to seek a safe shelter as winter approaches. The lower forms of life in this brook had no such intention. First, I detected dainty little frogs – the peeping hylodes – squatted on dead leaves and yellow pebbles, and so spotted, splotched, and wrinkled were they that it took sharp eyes to find them. Their idea of a shelter in winter is from enemies, and not from the frosty air; a little warmer sunshine to-day would have moved them to sing. Time and again during November they rattled and "peeped" almost as shrilly as ever in April, and they will again, if we are treated to a green Christmas.

The spirit of exploration seized me now, and I brushed the shallow waters with a cedar branch. Lazy mud minnows were whipped from their retreats, and a beautiful red salamander that I sent whizzing through the air wriggled among the brown leaves upon the ground. It was only after a hard chase that I captured it, and, holding it in my hand until rested, I endeavored to induce it to squeak, for it is one of a very few that has a voice; but it was not to be coaxed. It suffered many indignities in silence, and so shamed me by its patience that I gently placed it in the brook. Soon, black, shining whirligigs – the gyrinus – suddenly appeared, and a turtle, as if wondering what might be the cause of the commotion, thrust its head in the air, stared angrily at me, and returned to its hidden home. There was no dearth of life in the brook, yet this is a winter day. The ground is frozen, and the rattle of wagons upon the highway penetrates even to this remote recess in the deep woods.

As a child soon tires of one toy, so I longed, after an hour's play, for a new field and other forms of life, and so much for serious study as that I might vary my amusement; but let not this apparent aimlessness be held unworthy of the rambler. Call it play, if you choose, but the incidents

of such a day come back in bold relief when, with or without an effort, they are recalled. I have found it most fortunate that unconscious cerebation is so active when I wander about, toying, as here by the forest brook, with many forms of life. More than half the acts of every creature I meet are apparently meaningless at the moment of their occurrence, but their full significance is evident when in thought I wander a second time over the same ground. Scarcely regarded incidents come well to the fore and throw a flood of light upon what lacked at the time any evidence, on the creature's part, of complicated thought.

Herein, I think, lies the secret of so much disappointment when some people – and they are many – wander in the fields. Filled with enthusiastic desire upon laying down the teeming pages of Thoreau and Burroughs, they expect to see with another's eyes and appreciate with another's brain. They see a bird, a mammal, or a host of butterflies, and then ask themselves upon the spot, Well! what of them? The bare fact of their presence is all that the minds of inexperienced ramblers encompass. The wild life they have met excites a passing thrill and they give no further heed to it. And it never occurs to many to recall the incidents. Being a bit disappointed then, why give heed to the subject later? On the contrary, if at the close of the day, in the hills and hollows of the blazing wood upon the andirons, if the walk was in winter, we picture the scenes of the recent ramble, these same birds or mammals, or whatsoever else we saw, will be seen again in a new light. Why those birds and not others were where we found them; why the field-mice or rabbits or a weasel were where we saw them or it, will become evident. The various features of every visited spot will be remembered; and the cheery blaze upon the hearth tells us, as it were, the story that could not be read when facing Nature's open page. Some of us inveterate ramblers read more than others, when in the fields, but no one can afford to trust to this alone. To extract the whole truth, the past must be recalled again and again.

As I whiled away the time with the tenants of the brook, so I gave heed to every passing bird, and what a strange panorama, as one kind after another flitted by! The happy association of woods and water here, as it attracted me, drew them to the spot, yet no one loitered long. The busy brown tree-creeper traced the crannies of the wrinkled oaks; the nuthatches followed, and their complaining squeaks seemed expressive of disappointment that so little food was to be found. Was this true? Were these little birds really complaining? It certainly seemed so. But how treacherous is this impression of seeming so! Too often, I fear, the rambler is content with it and goes his way convinced that what was vaguely apparent was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing more nor less. I hold it probably true that if every bird which found itself too late was disposed to complain, there would be a vast deal more quarreling than actually occurs. How little contention there is in the bird-world! While it is true that birds of a feather flock together, it is equally so that widely different species also amicably associate, and flagrant is the act that calls for punishment. Better luck next time is the homely proverb that actuates all non-predatorial bird life.

But the merit of birds is their suggestiveness. Promptly following the nuthatches came the ever-welcome song-sparrow. It hopped, with springtide liveliness, among the dead leaves near the brook, and then, flying to a hazel bush near by, it sang that sweet song that not even the mocking-bird ventures to repeat. The woods vanished, and the old garden with its gooseberry hedge was before me. I was a wondering child again, listening and looking at the happy bird, happy as itself.

It is December, the day is cold, the trees are leafless, the ground frozen; but not a thought of all this had clouded my joy for half a day. There is the elixir of perpetual summer even in the woods in winter, and happy is he who can find it.

Old Almanacs

It is a dilapidated outbuilding now, and the merest ghost of its former self. Scarcely one of the many marked features of the old kitchen is left. The cavernous fireplace, the corner cupboard, the narrow box staircase, the heavy double doors, with their long strap hinges, the long narrow table by the south windows, have all been removed. And sad, too, to think that, one by one, the sturdy farmer folk that lived in and loved this now dark and dingy room have all passed away. For me, it is the Mecca to which I most fondly turn when indulging in retrospection. In and about it were passed many of those peculiarly happy days, the recollection of which grows brighter as the years roll by. From late autumn until spring, when for five months the nights were long, this kitchen was the favorite rendezvous, and conversation, rather than reading, the popular amusement. Not that there were no books in the house. There were fifty volumes, at least, in the old book-case, but I can not recall one in the hands of a reader. There are many of them now on my own shelves – Gibbon, Johnson, Goldsmith, Burns, and the journal of many a Quaker of colonial times. It would be unfair to say that books were unpopular, but rather that conversation was held in higher esteem. Then, certainly, every neighborhood had its characters, and their like has not been transmitted to the present generation. I saw the last of a native folk who had occupied my neighborhood since 1680. Now a new people, and as different as black from white, occupy the land; but during my early childhood, my grandfather's help, like himself, had always lived in the neighborhood. They had been boys together, and little wonder that, when a day's work was done, the evening should have been spent in reminiscent talk. The farmer was not off to his book at candle-light, and the "hands" left to their thoughts.

How glad, now, am I, that I caught, even in early youth, a glimpse of simpler times! In one way, however, the world has not changed; conversation continually turned upon the weather, and there was one book to which reference was often made and quite frequently consulted – the almanac. How plainly I can see my grandfather adjust his heavy-rimmed spectacles and turn to the record of the current month! "Yes, thee is right, Abijah; the moon changes in the forenoon." Then the thin pamphlet was hung again in its place in the chimney corner. Hard-headed and alertly observant as were the farmers of fifty years ago, they all deferred to the almanac's dictum. Men might say, perhaps, what they pleased; but if he who could write an almanac ventured to predict, who were they to dispute it? So they thought, and if snow had been foretold for the Fourth of July, they would have explained the reason why it did not come, and pity, not scorn, the prophet.

I do not know when the first almanac was hung in the chimney corner, but the custom, once started, continued to the end, and when the kitchen was dismantled, a great pile of "Poor Richards" were brought to light from a dark hole in the cavernous corner cupboard. The wisdom crowded upon those torn and tattered pages seems to have been lost, and the later generations were content, if I do not misunderstand them, with the commonplaces and predictions to which reference has been made. But with all their unquestioning reliance upon the almanac, the men who were daily out of doors were prophets unto themselves, and proud of the petty discoveries they claimed to have made. This it was that spiced their conversation and made the meeting of two or three in a cozy kitchen an attractive occurrence to young ears. I do not wonder that books were ignored, when every laboring man laid claim to peculiar knowledge, and, of course, formulated weather proverbs, the like of which have never got into print. For while the neighborhood had, like all others, its common stock of accepted "sayings," not a man for miles around but had some two or three that he had framed for his own guidance. Every discussion teemed with "according to Joshua," or "Jeremiah's saying is," but every man was largely a follower of himself. Looking backward, and studying my grandfather's "help," and even my farmer neighbors, I see, in the light of the present, that these men were both ignorant and wise; having a rich store of facts from which they drew illogical deductions.

Apropos of this, let me add that of a series of sixteen newspaper clippings, from papers published in October and November, 1889, fifteen of them were predictions of a winter of unusual severity in the Middle States. The one that maintained the coming of a mild winter gave no reasons for such a conclusion, but stated very briefly that "certain never-failing signs pointed that way." It is a pity that such signs were not generally known, now that the "ground-goose, hog-bone" theory has proved unreliable.

And so it was, a year earlier. During the autumn of 1888, I gathered, by the aid of several friends, a considerable number of newspaper clippings concerning the character of the coming winter. Most of them predicted a very severe season and a late spring; a few were somewhat more moderate in the use of superlatives, and one long essay on the breast-bone of the goose made me shiver to read, although the day was warm, and in spite of the assurance that each of the "phenomenally cold periods" would be alternated by "spells of fall-like weather." Not one hit the nail upon the head and foretold that December and January would be winter with winter left out. And only to-day (January 31) I find in a local paper that the musk-rats are stopping up the entrances to their homes, and February will be very cold. Perhaps! On the other hand, I have just received Volume I of the Geological Survey of New Jersey, in which is a most interesting chapter on the climate of this State. Looking over a tabulated statement of the weather, as characteristic of seasons, I find that we have had six notably mild winters in the past forty years, that of '81-'82 being "one of the warmest on record." Armed with these facts, I hunted up our oldest neighbor, Zephaniah Blank, and plied him with questions. Of course, as I intended, the conversation turned upon the weather, as it usually does, and he was very positive that we had had no such winter as the present for "nigh on to thirty years." The old gentleman could recollect the moderately warm winter of '57-'58, but that of '81-'82 had passed from his mind. Had a reporter overheard our talk upon the subject, the local paper would doubtless have recorded the present as the warmest winter in thirty years, which is not the fact. Besides, we are not yet out of the woods, for February is often very cold, and March, to put the best face upon it, exceedingly tricky. Considering that weather is the most talked-of of subjects, is it not strange that upon no other is so much ignorance displayed?

It has been said that every man is a fool or a physician at forty. Whether true or not, every sexagenarian hereabouts is a weather prophet, and their combined wisdom is, as might be seen, valueless. Every one of these worthy men, as such, is a delusion and a snare, but all have faithful followers. Uncle Zephaniah, for instance, was very impatient, to express it mildly, when I spoke of the winter of 1881-'82. The curl of his lip, the glitter of his eyes and wave of his hand, when he remarked, "As if I didn't know!" spoke volumes. Yet, in spite of his eighty years, he did not know. There is still another feature of weather wisdom, if I can call it such, that is even more remarkable – the proneness to forget the character of a season so soon after it has passed. It may be hard to believe, but many a person will stop to think when the question is put whether the great March blizzard was last year or the year before. Unless such a storm is coupled with some political event or a great disaster, as fire or shipwreck, it passes almost directly out of mind, and its magnitude dwindles in comparison to some lesser event with which the world's history was connected. And the moral of all this is: keep a diary, swear only by it, and give nothing more than a respectful hearing to unlettered historians and weather prophets.

But if the people have changed, the country has not; and from the same woodland almanac from which they drew their facts we can draw ours. Can any one read it aright? Verily, is not Nature a tricksy author? There are the flowers that many a town dweller thinks truly report the seasons. Pshaw! Away up in Massachusetts, Bradford Torrey found over seventy plants in bloom during a November afternoon; and full well I know of a meadow where violets, bluets, dandelions, and blue-curl can be gathered, even at Christmas, and all the year round, when we have, as now (1889-'90) a typical open winter.

What of the birds? For of these and blossoms is a naturalist's year made up. The woodland almanac goes for little so far as they are concerned – unless, indeed, you have a trained ear for varying twitters. Bird music is never lacking, and I have long held it an open question if we may not spare the thrush, when there are foxy-sparrows among the briers. So far as weather is concerned, we can not build upon our birds, and no one of our seasons lacks them. It is the whim of closet ornithologists and petty critics to assert that winter is comparatively birdless, but even this is not true. There are not so many species, but often quite as many individuals, and oftener more. Birdless, indeed! Redbirds, meadow-larks, song-sparrows, and blue jays at this moment are making merry in my garden. Notwithstanding all this, there will always be those who will strive to the end to decipher the woodland almanac, and where is he who claims not to have solved its meaning? It were well if every one spelled over a few pages of it every day. It is healthy exercise, fitting one to duties of all kinds, and never tending to sour the temper of a sane person if, at the close of threescore years and ten, he finds that he is sure of but the first lesson – there are four seasons. Weather wisdom, as we all know, meets us at every turn, and while usually irritating, occasionally proves a source of amusement. Some such experience as the following, may have been the fate of many more than I suppose.

John Blank is one of those unfortunates who desire to be thought a genius. To float with the current is beneath his dignity. Uz Gaunt described him well as one who persists in looking toward the west to see the sun rise. Knowing my love for the open fields, this would-be genius has kindly treated me, of late, to innumerable accounts of recent observations of beasts, birds, reptiles, and wild life's less noble forms, and certainly the man has remarkable powers in one direction – he can misinterpret admirably. "Think of it!" he exclaimed excitedly; "here it is December, and I have heard a frog croak! It was not a springtime croak, of course, but a cry of pain, and I believe a musk-rat dug it out of its winter quarters, and the sound I heard was a cry of pain." It is a wonder that he did not hear the musk-rat's chuckle over a good dinner, also. Here we have three assumptions – that frogs never sing in winter; that they habitually hibernate; and that musk-rats dig them out of the mud. The aforesaid John Blank had lived forty-odd years on a farm, and did not know that frogs voluntarily sang or croaked during mild winter days. Like many another, finding that it is cold in December, he turns his back on winter sunshine.

Here are some statistics concerning frogs in winter. Previous to Oct. 20, 1889, there had been white frost, some chilly days as well as nights, and yet the frogs sang merrily on that date. There was frost, snow, and ice during the following week, and then these same frogs were again in full chorus; and later, in November, as late as the 19th, they rattled and piped, not only in the sheltered marshes, but among the wilted stalks of lotus in an exposed upland field. Then a long interim, when I was constantly in town, but at noon, December 19, I heard them again, and on Jan. 12, 1890, frogs of at least two species were croaking; and, too, bees were about, snakes were sunning themselves, turtles crawled from the mud, and salamanders squatted on dead oak leaves in the full glare of an almost midsummer sun. When John Blank was told of this he looked his name; but he was not disconcerted. "Did you ever examine the marshes in winter?" I asked.

"Certainly not," he replied, and added: "What's to be found in frozen mud, cold water, and about dead grass?"

"More life than you ever saw in midsummer," was the impatient reply, and with this I moved off.

Blank maintained his reputation and declined to take a hint. "Did you ever see wild violets at Christmas?" he asked. I laughed, and assuming good-nature, said, "Come along," and started with the conceited nuisance to a sheltered meadow. The grass was not dead, although Christmas was at hand; there were even green leaves on the sassafras sprouts; the water was not cold, although its surface had been frozen; the mud was very soft. Clustered about the roots of a noble tulip tree were claytonias in bloom; in the moist meadows were pale-blue violets, and beyond, exposed to the sweep of every chilly breeze from the west, were houstonias, and scattered here and there were single dandelions. "This," I remarked, "is no unusual matter, referable to midwinter, and ought to be familiar to you;

but you have probably not looked in the proper places for these things"; and, taking my cue from dear old Uz Gaunt, added, "don't look in the west to see the sun rise."

Then, pleading an engagement with solitude, I bade John Blank "Good-morning."

The landscape lightened as the bore disappeared. And how an hour's outing with nature soothes the irritation of an unwelcome interview! If I were an editor, I would have a cage of frogs, with a bit of green moss and a pool of water like that now at my elbow. To this I could turn for mental refreshment the moment the retiring intruder faced the door of the sanctum. There is nothing so reviving as to contemplate a frog, or, better yet, a tree-toad. Here is one from Florida that takes the world philosophically. When it is too cool on the shady side of his home he creeps to the sunny side; and as the sun will not stand still, the toad moves with it; This seems too trivial to mention, but really is not. There are people in my neighborhood who growl because the sun does not shine through the north windows, and more than one old farmer who persists in shivering in the wagon-house, under protest, of course, while the woodshed is warm and sunny. There is a chance for every man born in the world, but this same world is not to be molded to every crank's convenience. Even my tree-toad knows that a fly may be on the wrong side of the glass for him; although it took months of vain bumping of his precious head before the idea reached his brain, and even now he sometimes forgets the lesson so painfully learned. On the other hand, there is little reason to believe that John Blank will look in the sunny meadows next year for belated blossoms. If he finds one by accident in a corner of a cold upland field, it will be heralded as a great discovery.

There is another tree-toad in the frog-pen that is a happy philosopher. Of late, either the food offered is not the proper sort, or the creature habitually fasts at this time of year, which is not improbable. Be this as it may, there is no giving way to despondency because of an empty stomach, and when his companions are taking noonday naps, or recalling the outer world that once they knew, this little fellow, from the door of his mossy cave, or perched upon a dead twig near by, sings merrily. There are doubtless some who would be stupid enough to declare it the cry of despair; but there is no trace of trouble in the sound; no tremulous quaver as though fraught with grief. It is the clear, joyous exultation of supreme content, as we hear it in the woods during bright October days. Again, perhaps those gifted with an ear for music would call the tree-toad's song a "squeak." This matters not, for when that tree-toad pipes his single note, I take an outing. My study walls vanish; the hillside and meadow, the winding creek, rolling field, and shady orchard are again, as of old, the playground of my rambling life.

A Quaker Christmas

The winters seemed colder, whether they were or not, when I was a boy; and some thirty years ago there was one Christmas week when it seemed as if the glacial period had suddenly returned. There was snow on the ground, and thick blue-black ice on the creeks and flooded meadows. One had not to take a circuitous route to reach whatever point he wished, and this to the boys of the neighborhood made the outdoor world more attractive. Not an old hollow tree, even, in the treacherous swamps, but could now be reached, and so the home of every owl, coon, or opossum, was at every boy's mercy. What, then, if it were cold! Boots and overcoat were equal to every need, and the wide and wild world was before us. There was a skeleton in my closet, nevertheless. Christmas was approaching, but never a sign of it within the walls of the old farm-house. For years it had come and gone with scarcely a mention made of the fact; and now, having heard something of holiday festivities from city cousins, I vowed I would revolutionize the family custom in one respect. But how? A hundred plans came as if by magic, but each was handicapped by impracticability – a condition of affairs that is very common to most men's maturer years. It must be a secret, of course. The opposition would prove formidable indeed if the matter were openly discussed. Never a Christmas had been celebrated for a full century in the old house, and why now? But I was determined, and so it came about that I had a merry Christmas.

It was a simple matter, after all; and how often it happens that, after days of puzzling over the impossible, an easy solution of a difficulty comes at the proper moment! When it was time to act, all was plain enough. On one plea or another, I went from house to house, as if the call was by mere accident, and made known my wishes to a judicious member of each family visited. All agreed to broach the subject, and so it resulted that two or more members of five families, each group in blissful ignorance of his neighbor's movements, determined to spend the day with my grandfather. It was the first surprise party in that staid Quaker neighborhood, and never before so merry a Christmas. Of course the originator was all innocence; but the puzzled expression on his grandfather's face and the perplexity of the women-folk were fun indeed to him. "There's company coming," I remarked, as a carriage turned in the lane. "Sure enough!" remarked my aunt, who, turning to her sister, added, "And there is almost nothing for dinner." I grinned. Before the first carriage drove up to the house, a second was in sight, and the third was not far behind.

"Truly," remarked neighbor A to neighbor B, "we did not expect to meet thee here. We've been intending to drive over for some time, but the work at home prevented."

"And that is what I was about to remark; the same impulse has moved us both." A certain small boy smiled.

"This is quite a Christmas celebration," the somewhat bewildered host replied, and no sooner had the sound of his voice died away than neighbor C was announced; and neighbors D and E followed in his wake. I lingered to hear the result, but did not dare show myself. My face was very red, for poor sedate grandfather was stuttering! "Really, truly; this is, treally, ruly" – I heard no more, but made a dash for the back yard. Unlucky dash! I collided with my portly aunt, and both sprawled upon the entry floor. The company came streaming from the parlor, but what came of it I never learned. I was up and away before the mystery was solved. A rest on the far side of the barn finally restored me. Joy and fear made it a merry and mad Christmas both, but the point was gained. The monotony of winter farm-life was broken – very much broken, in fact – for now the tables were turned, and voices were calling for me, some in persuasive, some in authoritative, tones. At last I responded; and oh! what relief, when the one thing needed was to run down chickens. "How many?" I quietly asked, "a dozen?" It was an unfortunate question. A glitter, full of meaning, flashed in the eyes of my portly aunt. She held me responsible for the day's excitement and extra labor, and I knew it; but I

grinned whenever I caught glimpses of the gathered neighbors, who could not cease to wonder over the strange coincidence.

Dinner was served in due time. It took two tables to seat the guests, and the old kitchen was full for once. All went well until the portly lady, who still smarted from her fall, asked of me "what all this meant?"

"What does what mean?" I asked in reply.

"That all these friends should happen here to-day?"

"How should I know?" I asked.

"Thee does know all about it," the old lady insisted, and so a confession was forced. What else could I do? Twenty curious faces were centered upon me, and the truth came out.

"Never mind, never mind!" chimed in my good grandfather, at the proper moment. "I was sure a committee was about to take me to task for some offense, and as I have come off so well, so shall he."

"That boy will make something some of these days," remarked one long-headed man; but, alas! his usual good judgment failed for once. That boy, so far as he is aware, has not made much since then – much worth the making; but has, no end of blunders.

Who cares? It was my first jolly Christmas and a complete success; and would that the same season could once again be jolly!

A New Place to Loaf

One must plow deeply nowadays to unearth novelty. The world has been written up, and that which we now read is but the echo of some well-nigh forgotten author. Many will be quick to question this, and battle for their originality, but a few days of honest search on their part among really old books will bring them to confusion. It is with living writers as with the "oldest inhabitants" who declare they never knew such weather – they had better not face statistics. Blooming orchards in January are on record, and February roses gladdened our great-grandmothers.

"Is there nothing more to be said?" I had been asking of myself as I daily tramped about the farm, or, on rainy days, ruminated in the attic in a forest of discarded furniture. The outlook, for a while, was certainly discouraging, and then suddenly the hay-mow came to mind. As a boy, I loved the hay-mow; how is it now, in my maturer years?

Spurred by the impulse of so bright a thought, I went to the stable, and with old-timed suppleness clomb the straight ladder. What memories of summer days in the meadows rushed in with the odor of the heaped-up hay! A fancy, perhaps; but even the sweet-scented vernal grass that yearly adds its charm to a single corner of one field seemed stored in the dark loft. It matters not; that corner, with its wealth of bright blossoms, the glittering sunshine of May's perfect mornings, the song of nesting thrushes, and the rose-throated grosbeak's matchless song, were plainly seen and heard. It mattered not that it was January instead of June, and the shrill north wind whispered its well-nigh forgotten warnings – summer reigned in the hay-mow. The noontide glare that webbed the dark with trembling threads of light aided my fancy, and I reveled in day-dreams.

That was a painful pleasure when the past was measured, and forty years marked off the distance between my first visit and the present. Would life have appeared as rosy-hued could I have looked as far forward as unto to-day? Perhaps not. And what of the retrospective glances that dimly discern the timid child floundering then in the half-filled mow? With what wonder were the darting swallows marked as they sped to their nests upon the rafters, and then fled through a gaping chink to the outer world! What mystery shrouded the hastening mice that ran across the mow's wide window-sill, squeaked as they met, and hurried on their way! Why would they not stop and speak to the little child? Even then, birds and mice gave rise to strange and painful thoughts, for why, indeed, should they fear the child that longed to be their playmate? That fancy has not fled unto this day. I love them now as then, and, no longer wondering why they fear man, regret the fact almost as keenly as in days gone by.

And later, when a sturdy lad – but lazy – what a favorite hiding-place when there were distasteful tasks to be shirked! The rattle of a loose shingle to-day became the familiar calling of my name when errands were to be run, when the hated churn was ready, wood to be cut or burdens to be carried. But, like all else that this world offers, the hay-mow was not perfection. I paid dearly for my thoughtlessness more than once. There was much evidence of a busy day about the house, some thirty years ago, and at breakfast I imagined that I would be in demand; but to even think of work upon such a perfect day for idling was painful, and, as usual, I soon disappeared. But nature was perverse. Not a familiar nook about the farm responded as it usually did. Even the trees were so wrapped in their own affairs as to turn the cold shoulder. Everything went wrong, and hours before noon I longed to be called. I listened for some familiar voice or the regulation toot-toot of the dinner-horn. The old roosters about the barn crowed in a bantering way, as if calling me the foolish boy that I was. It was irritating beyond endurance, and so, with the usual unreason of piqued youth, I crept into the hay-mow, and, while smarting from self-inflicted pain, fell asleep. Hours passed, and then, starting from a nightmare dream, I went sullenly to the house. Every one smiled as I entered. What was the matter? Every one was silent, but the secret could not be kept. A picnic party had called for me. "It is so seldom thee hears me," remarked my aunt, "that I did not think it worth my while to call thee

to-day," and then every one smiled exasperatingly. No dinner, no picnic, no appetite for supper; but my eyes were opened.

It is the same hay-mow as forty years ago, when first I saw it; the same as eighty years ago, when my father watched it building, and made it his playground, if not a lazy lad's refuge. Here is the same loose floor that needs a thick mat of hay to render it safe to walk over, and, in one sense, the same dusty festoons of cobwebs clinging to every corner; while the roof, as of old, is starred with mud-wasps' nests and dotted with the swallows' masonry. My father's playground! Did he, too, I wondered, often linger here, thinking much the same thoughts and planning his life's battles while idly resting on the hay? It is not upon record, nor need be, but the old hay-mow bears testimony to his one-time presence here. Flinging open the heavy shutter of the south window, I glanced at the shining oaken sill and frame. Both were covered with rudely carved letters, initials of many a lad long since grown to manhood, and not one of them now living. How closely I was linked to a long-gone past! In the bright sunshine of this January day there was no trace of winter in the landscape. From my outlook I saw nothing of the familiar fields and distant river so dear to my own boyhood, but that wilder valley and more rugged fields that were the pet theme of my father's stories when he charmed his hearers telling of his youth. How tame is the present when compared with what has been! What though the world has wonderfully advanced, there is not for me, for one – and I voice many another – aught in the present, or aught that imagination conjures up as the possible future, that can charm as does the sweet calling back of days gone by.

Round about a Spring in Winter

We dwellers in the northern hemisphere naturally think of winter as cold, and shudder at the idea of plunging into the water at this season. The common demand is, if cold must be endured, let it at least be rid of moisture. But all animals are not of this way of thinking. To avoid the cutting blasts of the north wind, the stinging sleet, the pelting hail, and driving snow, many a creature boldly plunges in or hovers about the sparkling waters of every bubbling spring. The reason is, at such spots there is a uniform and not low temperature.

The impression is well-nigh universal that the great majority of animals, other than a few hardy birds, are asleep from autumn until spring; that they are hibernating, as it is called. It is quite true when we walk across an exposed field or follow a wood-path over some high hill, such an impression will not be disturbed by anything that we see or hear; but these are not the only routes open to us. Stroll along the river shore, even when it is blocked with ice, and in the little ponds of open water you will be pretty sure to see abundant forms of life; but, better yet, stray over the meadows, where, in more senses than one, perpetual summer reigns. Break the thick ice, if necessary, that shuts from view the shallow pool, scoop up the dead pond weeds that mat the soft mud below, and see how every bit of it teems with curious life. The brilliant dragon-flies that darted so angrily about you last summer dropped their eggs here in the water, and these, hatching, produced creatures so widely different from their parents that few people suspect any kinship. Veritable dragons, on a small scale, they are none the less active because ice and snow have shut out the sunlight. With their terrible jaws they tear to fragments in a moment every insect within their reach.

Like the dragon-flies, better known perhaps as “devil’s darning-needles,” there are many other insects that likewise spend their early days in the meadow pools, and, as the collector will find, every scoopful of mud and leaves will be tenanted by a range of forms, some grotesque, others graceful, and all of abounding interest.

These curious creatures have not their little world to themselves. There are many fishes continually plowing up the mud with their gristly snouts, and ready to swallow every protesting wriggler that dares show itself in spite of the nipping jaws. Whether the slim and slippery salamanders, commonly called lizards, do the same, I do not know, but they tunnel the mud and burrow under every heap of water-soaked leaves, and are so active, be the weather what it may, that some nourishment must be taken. And there are frogs; not one of them disposed to exertion, perhaps, but none the less able to leap or burrow headlong in the yielding mud the instant they suspect danger. During the present winter I have even heard them faintly croaking at midday, but this, of course, is quite unusual.

During January not a turtle need be looked for, sunning itself, however warm may be the weather, but, like the other creatures I have named, they are not asleep. In a shallow basin, lined with the cleanest of white sand, through which bubbled an intermitting stream of sparkling water, I recently surprised a mud-turtle poking anxiously about, evidently in search of food. The creature had a lean and anxious look, and its bright eyes meant mischief, as it proved, when I reached forward to pick it up. I was bitten after a fashion, and therefore delighted, for I had never before known these turtles to be snapping, and a discovery, however insignificant, is truly delightful.

Active life, then, in many of its varied forms, can be found during the winter in the mud, sand, and water of almost every spring, and this fact very naturally has its influence round about the spot. There is no small winter bird, sparrow, titmouse, wren, or creeper, that evidently prefers the immediate surroundings of a spring to all other spots, but every one of twenty or more delights to make daily visits to such a locality, and the sight of the green growths that crowd the water’s edge prompts them all to greater cheerfulness, I have thought, than when treading the mazes of upland thickets or scanning the dreary outlook of a snow-clad field. But yesterday, more like June than January, it is true, I stood by a little spring that welled up from among the roots of an old maple,

to watch the movements of a minnow that had strayed from the creek near by. While there a wee nuthatch came darting down from the trees and perched upon a projecting root, scarcely an inch above the water. It sat for a moment, like a fairy kingfisher, and then plunged into the shallow depths with all the grace of an accomplished diver. More than this, as it shook the glittering drops from its feathers upon emerging it sang sweetly. This unlooked-for conclusion of its bathing frolic was the more remarkable, as the ordinary utterance of the bird is anything but musical.

There are large birds also that frequent the springs habitually in winter, and the fact of their presence is of itself evidence that other active animal life must also abound. I refer to herons, bitterns, and I may add crows. The former two subsist almost exclusively upon frogs and fish, while the latter are content with anything not absolutely indigestible.

How vividly I can recall my astonishment when stooping once to drink from a bubbling spring at the base of the river bluff a dark shadow passed over me, and I sprang with such a sudden motion to my feet that I lost my balance! A great blue heron, unheeding my presence or ignoring it, was slowly settling down to the very spot where I stood, and had I remained quiet it would have perched upon me, I believe. As it was, it gave an impatient flirt to its whole body, showing annoyance and not fear, and flew slowly down the river. Before I had wholly regained my composure and had time to step aside, the huge bird returned, and at once took its stand in the shallow water, as silent, motionless, erect as a sentinel is supposed to be. This was many years ago, and I have seldom failed to see them, sometimes many together, winter after winter since. The moody bittern, on the other hand, is much more disposed to migrate in autumn; but at least a single one is likely to be found on sheltered hillsides, particularly where there are springs with marshy areas surrounding them. I have learned this recently of these birds, and either have overlooked them in years past, or it is a new departure for them. It is not unlikely that the latter should be true. Our familiar cat-bird is losing its migratory instinct very rapidly, judging from the numbers that winter in the valley of the Delaware River. I have seen several recently, and every one of them was in a green-brier thicket, and feeding on the berries of this troublesome vine.

But if there were no green things in or about the springs in winter they would be cheerless spots, after all, in spite of the many forms of animal life that we have seen frequent them. The fact that it is winter would constantly intrude if the water sparkled only among dead leaves. Happily this is not the case. At every spring I saw – and there were many of them – during a recent ramble there was an abundance of chickweed, bitter-dock, corydalis, and a species of forget-me-not; sometimes one or two of these only, and more often all of them; none in bloom, but all as fresh and bright as ever a plant in June. Then, too, in advance of the plant proper, we find the matured bloom of the skunk-cabbage – would that it had as pretty a name as the plant deserves! – with its sheath-like covering, bronze, crimson, golden, and light green, brightening many a dingy spot where dead leaves have been heaped by the winds all winter long. These fresh growths cause us to forget that the general outlook is so dreary, and give to the presence of the abundant animal life a naturalness that would otherwise be wanting.

And not only about the springs, but in them, often choking the channels until little lakes are formed, are found many plants that know no summer of growth and then a long interval of rest. The conditions of the season are too nearly alike, and while in winter there is less increase, growth never entirely ceases, and certainly the bright green of the delicate foliage is never dulled. Anacharis, or water-weed, I find in profusion at all the larger springs; if not, then callitriche, or water-starwort. The latter is as delicate as the finer ferns, and often conceals much of the water in which it grows, as it has both floating and submerged leaves.

In both these plants fish, frogs, and salamanders and large aquatic insects congregate, and are so effectually hidden that when standing on the side of the spring basin a person is not likely to see any living thing, and if the spirit of investigation does not move him he will go away thinking animal life is hibernating, for so indeed it is set down in many books. But it does not always do to plunge the

hand in among the weeds, and so try to land whatever may be tangled in the mass you pull ashore. Some of the insects resent such interference by biting severely – the water-boatmen, or *Notonectæ*, for instance – and they have the advantage of seeing all that is going on in the world about them, for they swim upon their backs.

A delicate and beautifully marked sunfish that is silvery white with inky black bands across it is common in the Delaware tide-water meadows, and is found nowhere else. Recently in a spring pool, where the flow of water was almost stopped by aquatic mosses, *Hypnum* and *Fontinalis*, I found nearly a hundred of these fish gathered in a little space. All were active, and so vigorous that an abundant food supply can be presupposed; but I did not bring the microscope to bear upon this question, and it is upon minute forms of life such as would be readily overlooked by the casual observer that they subsist. But, as is everywhere the case, these fish are not free from molestation, although to the onlooker they seem to be dwelling in a paradise. There is a huge insect, murderous as a tiger, that singles them out, I have thought, from the hosts of more commonplace species which we can easily spare. It is known as a *Belostoma*, and has not, so far as I can learn, any common name. If they were better known they probably would have a dozen. They are "wide and flat-bodied aquatic insects, of more or less ovate outline, furnished with powerful flattened swimming legs," and the front ones are "fitted for seizing and holding tightly the victims upon which they pounce." When I found the timid banded sunfish huddled together in the water moss I thought of the savage *Belostoma* and hunted for them. None seemed to be lurking in the moss, but just beyond, in an open space where twigs had drifted and dead leaves lay about, I found two of them, and I doubt not they were lying in wait, knowing where the fish then were and that sooner or later some would pass that way. To determine by means of crude experiments how far a water-bug has intelligence is a difficult if not impracticable undertaking, but I can assure the reader that the many I have watched in aquaria *seemed* to be very cunning, and constantly planning how they might surprise the fish, for these, on the other hand, knew the danger of their presence, and shunned them in every possible way.

It is much to be regretted, I think, that aquaria have fallen into disrepute. They are not, as has been said, failures; but if the labor of their care can not be undertaken, let him who would know more of common aquatic life not fail to occasionally ramble round about the springs in winter.

A Bay-Side Outing

A cool, gray mist overspread the wide reach of meadows, and shut from view the still wider reach of water beyond. The clouds were sullen, and with each gusty sweep of sharp east wind were dashes of chilling rain. The outlook was dismal; the more so that my companions and myself had journeyed scores of miles to reach the Pleasantville meadows. Perhaps the village itself was pleasant, but now its suburbs were forbidding. Let me misquote Euripides:

> What *the morning* is to be
> Human wisdom never learns.

So it proved; the east wind was soon tempered to three shorn lambs, the sun peeped out upon us from time to time, and long before noon Nature was smiling and contentment reigned.

That which most impressed me as I neared the water was the painful silence that prevailed over all the scene. Not a sound save that of one's own footsteps was to be heard. The impression of an absolutely deserted country, of a region that had been swept by a pestilence fatal even to insect life, took strong hold of me; but only for a moment. Presently, up from the tufts of tall grass rose, on every side, whistling meadow-larks, filling the air at once with sweet sounds. How my heart leaped, my cheeks tingled! With what eagerness I strove to catch their every note! for dear to me now as, when a boy, the world daily opened up a new scene of delights, is that old, ever-new refrain of the meadow-lark —*I see you – you can't see me*.

But I did see them. To the few scattered, stunted trees they flew, and, perching at the very tops, were sharply limned against the pale-gray sky. Did I exert some subtle influence over them? Whether or not, they soon returned, and from hidden by-ways in the rank grass sang again and again, to cheer me, while at work. For not as a rambler merely, but to labor diligently, had I come so far.

Separated from the bay by a narrow strip of meadow, rises a little hillock that tall weeds would have hidden. This was one of our objective points; the other was an adjoining sand-ridge. Over the former we proposed to search for whatsoever the Indians had left behind; into the latter we proposed to dig, believing some of these people had been buried there; all this we did. The little hillock was a shell-heap, or "kitchen refuse-heap," as they are called by European archæologists. Probably nothing tells so plainly the story of the past as do these great gatherings of burned and broken shells. So recent was every fire-mark, so fresh the bits of charcoal, so sharp the fragments of roasted shells, it would not have startled the relic-hunters had the Indians filed past on their way to the adjoining fishing grounds; and yet, when critically examined, this particular spot had evidently been long deserted. Careful and long-protracted search failed to bring to view any trace of other than most primitive Indian handiwork. One patient searcher, in fact, had to content himself with a few flint flakes and the tiniest bits of rude pottery; while another hunter was more fortunate and drew from the side of a deep and narrow path a pretty quartz knife; and later, two slender, shapely arrow-heads were found.

A beggarly show, perhaps, but what if our hands were not busy picking up relics; our fancies were up and doing. We had evidences and to spare that a primitive people had once dwelt here, and imagination supplied all deficiencies as to the matter of when and why and of the manner of their simple lives. Such ever is the charm of an outing like this. One has to deal so continually with stern facts in every-day life that fancy is the better company when out for a stroll. Nor need we deceive ourselves. A bit of burned clay in hand means the primitive potter in the near foreground. Given a single flake of stone, and the knife, spear, arrow, and all their belongings are in the hands of men who stand out boldly before us. Fancy within bounds is the twin-sister of fact, but mischief brews when she oversteps the mark. An hour with potsherds is monotonous. One longs for some more shapely trace of human handiwork, but among heaps of broken and burned shells, these are not frequent.

Herein the kitchen-middens of the New Jersey coast differ, as a rule, from the former village sites in the river valleys. It would appear that the Indian's life as a coast-dweller was simplicity itself. It meant the mere gathering of food from the shallow water. No contrivances were called for, so no specialized tools were left behind, and in their annual pilgrimages to the coast, the inland people either took but little with them, or were very careful to carry back everything they had brought. No wonder, then, we grow restive when a richer harvest is promised by the mere leaping of a fence. There, in a grassy field, it was reported, Indians had been buried, and how exciting it is to know that a skeleton may be brought to light by the mere turning of the sod. It has been cruelly said that he who removes from the ground a recently buried body is a ghoul, but if we wait until the flesh has decayed, then the collector of dry bones becomes an archæologist. It is not a fair statement; but whether true or not, we gave it no heed, but proceeded to dig. Scanning each spadeful of dirt for traces of bones, we soon found them, and all was excitement. Little by little, whole bones were exposed to view, and, following these up with the greatest care, that first of prizes to an archæologist, a skull, was secured. Later a second and a third were found. Our day was full. No, not quite full. We knew that often a bowl, trinkets, and a weapon or two were buried with the body, but nothing of the kind was found. It was a matter of dry bones only, unless we except the one instance where the upper shell of a large turtle rested on one of the skulls. This was a cap that would scarcely prove comfortable to a living person, although not without the merit of being quite water-proof.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.