

SHARP DALLAS LORE

THE FACE OF THE FIELDS

Dallas Sharp

The Face of the Fields

«Public Domain»

Sharp D.

The Face of the Fields / D. Sharp — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

I	5
II	12
III	19
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	21

Dallas Lore Sharp

The Face of the Fields

I

THE FACE OF THE FIELDS

THERE was a swish of wings, a flash of gray, a cry of pain, a squawking, cowering, scattering flock of hens, a weakly fluttering pullet, and yonder, swinging upward into the October sky, a marsh hawk, buoyant and gleaming silvery in the sun. Over the trees he beat, circled once, and disappeared.

The hens were still flapping for safety in a dozen directions, but the gray harrier had gone. A bolt of lightning could not have dropped so unannounced, could not have vanished so completely, could scarcely have killed so quickly. I ran to the pullet, but found her dead. The harrier's stroke, delivered with fearful velocity, had laid head and neck open as with a keen knife. Yet a fraction slower and he would have missed, for the pullet caught the other claw on her wing. The gripping talons slipped off the long quills, and the hawk swept on without his quarry. He dared not come back for it at my feet; and so with a single turn above the woods he was gone.

The scurrying hens stopped to look about them. There was nothing in the sky to see. They stood still and silent a moment. The rooster *chucked*. Then one by one they turned back into the open pasture. A huddled group under the hen-yard fence broke up and came out with the others. Death had flashed among them, but had missed *them*. Fear had come, but had gone. Within two minutes – in less time – from the fall of the stroke, every hen in the flock was intent at her scratching, or as intently chasing the gray grasshoppers over the pasture.

Yet, as they scratched, the high-stepping cock would frequently cast up his eye toward the treetops; would sound his alarum at the flight of a robin; and if a crow came over, he would shout and dodge and start to run. But instantly the shadow would pass, and instantly chanticleer —

He loketh as it were a grim leoun,
And on his toos he rometh up and doun;
.....
Thus roial, as a prince is in an halle.

He wasn't afraid. Cautious, alert, watchful he was, but not fearful. No shadow of dread hangs dark and ominous across the sunshine of his pasture. Shadows come – like a flash; and like a flash they vanish away.

We cannot go far into the fields without sighting the hawk and the snake, the very shapes of Death. The dread Thing, in one form or another, moves everywhere, down every wood-path and pasture-lane, through the black close waters of the mill-pond, out under the open of the winter sky, night and day, and every day, the four seasons through. I have seen the still surface of a pond break suddenly with a swirl, and flash a hundred flecks of silver into the light, as the minnows leap from the jaws of the pike. Then a loud rattle, a streak of blue, a splash at the centre of the swirl, and I see the pike, twisting and bending in the beak of the kingfisher. The killer is killed; but at the mouth of the nest-hole in the steep sandbank, swaying from a root in the edge of the turf above, hangs the black snake, the third killer, and the belted kingfisher, dropping the pike, darts off with a cry. I have been afield at times when one tragedy has followed another in such rapid and continuous succession as to put a whole shining, singing, blossoming world under a pall. Everything has seemed to cower, skulk, and hide, to run as if pursued. There was no peace, no stirring of small life, not even in the quiet of

the deep pines; for here a hawk would be nesting, or a snake would be sleeping, or I would hear the passing of a fox, see perhaps his keen hungry face an instant as he halted, winding me.

Fox and snake and hawk are real, but not the absence of peace and joy – except within my own breast. There is struggle and pain and death in the woods, and there is fear also, but the fear does not last long; it does not haunt and follow and terrify; it has no being, no substance, no continuance. The shadow of the swiftest scudding cloud is not so fleeting as this shadow in the woods, this Fear. The lowest of the animals seem capable of feeling it; yet the very highest of them seem incapable of dreading it; for them Fear is not of the imagination, but of the sight, and of the passing moment.

The present only toucheth thee!

It does more, it throngs him – our fellow mortal of the stubble field, the cliff, and the green sea. Into the present is lived the whole of his life – none of it is left to a storied past, none sold to a mortgaged future. And the whole of this life is action; and the whole of this action is joy. The moments of fear in an animal's life are moments of reaction, negative, vanishing. Action and joy are constant, the joint laws of all animal life, of all nature, from the shining stars that sing together, to the roar of a bitter northeast storm across these wintry fields.

We shall get little rest and healing out of nature until we have chased this phantom Fear into the dark of the moon. It is a most difficult drive. The pursued too often turns pursuer, and chases us back into our burrows, where there is nothing but the dark to make us afraid. If every time a bird cries in alarm, a mouse squeaks with pain, or a rabbit leaps in fear from beneath our feet, we, too, leap and run, dodging the shadow as if it were at our own heels, then we shall never get farther toward the open fields than Chuchundra, the muskrat, gets toward the middle of the bungalow floor. We shall always creep around by the wall, whimpering.

But there is no such thing as fear out of doors. There was, there will be; you may see it for an instant on your walk to-day, or think you see it; but there are the birds singing as before, and as before the red squirrel, under cover of large words, is prying into your purposes. The universal chorus of nature is never stilled. This part, or that, may cease for a moment, for a season it may be, only to let some other part take up the strain; as the winter's deep bass voices take it from the soft lips of the summer, and roll it into thunder, until the naked hills seem to rock to the measures of the song.

So must we listen to the winter winds, to the whistle of the soaring hawk, to the cry of the trailing hounds.

I have had more than one hunter grip me excitedly, and with almost a command bid me hear the music of the baying pack. There are hollow halls in the swamps that lie to the east and north and west of me, that catch up the cry of the fox hounds, that blend it, mellow it, round it, and roll it, rising and falling over the meadows these autumn nights in great globes of sound, as pure and sweet as the pearly notes of the wood thrush rolling around their silver basin in the summer dusk.

It is a different kind of music when the pack breaks into the open on the warm trail: a chorus then of individual tongues singing the ecstasy of pursuit. My blood leaps; the natural primitive wild thing of muscle and nerve and instinct within me slips its leash, and on past with the pack it drives, the scent of the trail single and sweet in its nostrils, a very fire in its blood, motion, motion, motion in its bounding muscles, and in its being a mighty music, spheric and immortal, a carol, chant and pæan, nature's "unjarred chime," —

The fair music that all creatures made
To their great Lord, whose love their motions swayed
In perfect diapason, whilst they stood
In first obedience, and their state of good.

But what about the fox and his share in this gloria? It is a solemn music to him, certainly, loping wearily on ahead; but what part has he in the chorus? No part, perhaps, unless we grimly call him its conductor. But the point is the chorus, that it never ceases, the hounds at this moment, not the fox, in the leading rôle.

“But the chorus ceases for me,” you say. “My heart is with the poor fox.” So is mine, and mine is with the dogs too. Many a night I have bayed with the pack, and as often, oftener, I think, I have loped and dodged and doubled with the fox, pitting limb against limb, lung against lung, wit against wit, and always escaping. More than once, in the warm moonlight of the early fall, I have led them on and on, spurring their lagging muscles with a sight of my brush, on and on, through the moonlit night, through the day, on into the moon again, and on until – only the stir of my own footsteps has followed me. Then doubling once more, creeping back a little upon my track, I have looked at my pursuers, silent and stiff upon the trail, and, ere the echo of their cry has died away, I have caught up the chorus and carried it single-throated through the wheeling singing spheres.

There is more of fact than of fancy to this. That a fox ever purposely ran a dog to death, would be hard to prove; but that the dogs run themselves to death in a single extended chase after a single fox is a common occurrence here in the woods about the farm. Occasionally the fox may be overtaken by the hounds; seldom, however, except in the case of a very young one or of a stranger, unacquainted with the lay of the land, driven into the rough country here by an unusual combination of circumstances.

I have been both fox and hound; I have run the race too often not to know that both enjoy it at times, fox as much as hound. Some weeks ago the dogs carried a young fox around and around the farm, hunting him here, there, everywhere, as if in a game of hide-and-peek. An old fox would have led them on a long coursing run across the range. It was early fall and warm, so that at dusk the dogs were caught and taken off the trail. The fox soon sauntered up through the mowing field behind the barn, came out upon the bare knoll near the house, and sat there in the moonlight yapping down at Rex and Dewy, the house dogs in the two farms below. Rex is a Scotch collie, Dewy a dreadful mix of dog-dregs. He had been tail-ender in the pack for a while during the afternoon. Both dogs answered back at the young fox. But he could not egg them on. Rex was too fat, Dewy had had enough; not so the young fox. It had been fun. He wanted more. “Come on, Dewy!” he cried. “Come on, Rex, play tag again. You’re still ‘it.’”

I was at work with my chickens one day when the fox broke from cover in the tall woods, struck the old wagon road along the ridge, and came at a gallop down behind the hencoops, with five hounds not a minute behind. They passed with a crash and were gone – up over the ridge and down into the east swamp. Soon I noticed that the pack had broken, deploying in every direction, beating the ground over and over. Reynard had given them the slip, on the ridge-side, evidently, for there were no cries from below in the swamp.

The noon whistles blew, and leaving my work I went down to re-stake my cow in the meadow. I had just drawn her chain-pin when down the road through the orchard behind me came the fox, hopping high up and down, his neck stretched, his eye peeled for poultry. Spying a white hen of my neighbor’s, he made for her, clear to the barnyard wall. Then, hopping higher for a better view, he sighted another hen in the front yard, skipped in gayly through the fence, seized her, loped across the road, and away up the birch-grown hills beyond.

The dogs had been at his very heels ten minutes before. He had fooled them. He had done it again and again. They were even now yelping at the end of the baffling trail behind the ridge. Let them yelp. It is a kind and convenient habit of dogs, this yelping, one can tell so exactly where they are. Meantime one can take a turn for one’s self at the chase, get a bite of chicken, a drink of water, a wink or two of rest, and when the yelping gets warm again, one is quite ready to pick up one’s heels and lead the pack another merry dance. The fox is almost a humorist.

This is the way the races are all run off. Now and then they may end tragically. A fox cannot reckon on the hunter with a gun. Only dogs entered into the account when the balance in the scheme

of things was struck for the fox. But, mortal finish or no, the spirit of the chase is neither rage nor terror, but the excitement of a matched game, the ecstasy of pursuit for the hound, the passion of escape for the fox, without fury or fear – except for the instant at the start and at the finish – when it is a finish.

This is the spirit of the chase – of the race, more truly, for it is always a race, where the stake is not life and death, as we conceive of life and death, but rather the joy of being. The hound cares as little for his own life as for the life he is hunting. It is the race, instead; it is the moment of crowded, complete, supreme existence for him – “glory” we call it when men run it off together. Death, and the fear of death, are inconceivable to the animal mind. Only enemies exist in the world out of doors, only hounds, foxes, hawks – they, and their scents, their sounds and shadows; and not fear, but readiness only. The level of wild life, of the soul of all nature, is a great serenity. It is seldom lowered, but often raised to a higher level, intenser, faster, more exultant.

The serrate pines on my horizon are not the pickets of a great pen. My fields and swamps and ponds are not one wide battlefield, as if the only work of my wild neighbors were bloody war, and the whole of their existence a reign of terror. This is a universe of law and order and marvelous balance; conditions these of life, of normal, peaceful, joyous life. Life and not death is the law, joy and not fear is the spirit, is the frame of all that breathes, of very matter itself.

And ever at the loom of Birth
The Mighty Mother weaves and sings;
She weaves – fresh robes for mangled earth;
She sings – fresh hopes for desperate things.

“For the rest,” says Hathi, most unscientific of elephants, in the most impossible of Jungle Stories, “for the rest, Fear walks up and down the Jungle by day and by night... And only when there is one great Fear over all, as there is now, can we of the Jungle lay aside our little fears and meet together in one place as we do now.”

Now, the law of the Indian Jungle is as old and as true as the sky, and just as widespread and as all-encompassing. It is the identical law of my New England pastures. It obtains here as it holds far away yonder. The trouble is all with Hathi. Hathi has lived so long in a British camp, has seen so few men but British soldiers, and has felt so little law but British military law in India, that very naturally Hathi gets the military law and the Jungle law mixed up.

Now these are the Laws of the Jungle, and many and mighty are they;
But the head and the hoof of the Law, and the haunch and the hump
is – Obey!

else one of the little fears, or the BIG FEAR, will get you!

But this is the Law of the Camp, and as beautifully untrue of the Jungle, and of my woods and pastures, as Hathi’s account of how, before Fear came, the First of the Tigers ate grass. Still, Nebuchadnezzar ate grass, and he also grew eagles’ feathers upon his body. Perhaps the First of the Tigers had feathers instead of fur, though Hathi is silent as to that, saying only that the First of the Tigers had no stripes. It might not harm us to remember, however, that nowadays – as was true in the days of the Sabretooth tiger (he is a fossil) – tigers eat grass only when they feel very bad, or when they find a bunch of catnip. The wild animals that Hathi knew are more marvelous than the Wild Animals I Have Known, but Hathi’s knowledge of Jungle law is all stuff and nonsense.

There is no ogre, Fear, no command, Obey, but the widest kind of a personal permit to live – joyously, abundantly, intensely, frugally at times, painfully at times, and always with large liberty;

until, suddenly, the time comes to Let Live, when death is almost sure to be instant, with little pain, and less fear.

But am I not generalizing from the single case of the fox and hounds? or at most from two cases – the hen and the hawk? And are not these cases far from typical? Fox and hound are unusually matched, both of them are canines, and so closely related that the dog has been known to let a she-fox go unharmed at the end of an exciting hunt. Suppose the fox were a defenseless rabbit, what of fear and terror then?

Ask any one who has shot in the rabbit fields of southern New Jersey. The rabbit seldom runs in blind terror. He is soft-eyed, and timid, and as gentle as a pigeon, but he is not defenseless. A nobler set of legs was never bestowed by nature than the little cotton-tail's. They are as wings compared with the deformities that bear up the ordinary rabbit hound. With winged legs, protecting color, a clear map of the country in his head, – its stumps, rail-piles, cat-brier tangles, and narrow rabbit-roads, – with all this as a handicap, Bunny may well run his usual cool and winning race. The balance is just as even, the chances quite as good, and the contest as interesting, to him as to Reynard.

I have seen a rabbit squat close in his form and let a hound pass yelping within a few feet of him, but as ready as a hair-trigger should he be discovered. I have seen him leap for his life as the dog sighted him, and bounding like a ball across the stubble, disappear in the woods, the hound within two jumps of his flashing tail. I have waited at the end of the wood-road for the runners to come back, down the home-stretch, for the finish. On they go for a quarter, or perhaps half a mile, through the woods, the baying of the hound faint and intermittent in the distance, then quite lost. No, there it is again, louder now. They have turned the course. I wait.

The quiet life of the woods is undisturbed, for the voice of the hound is only an echo, not unlike the far-off tolling of a slow-swinging bell. The leaves stir as a wood-mouse scurries from his stump; an acorn rattles down; then in the winding wood-road I hear the *pit-pat, pit-pat*, of soft furry feet, and there at the bend is the rabbit. He stops, rises high up on his haunches, and listens. He drops again upon all fours, scratches himself behind the ear, reaches over the cart-rut for a nip of sassafras, hops a little nearer, and throws his big ears forward in quick alarm, for he sees me, and, as if something had exploded under him, he kicks into the air and is off, – leaving a pretty tangle for the dog to unravel later on, by this mighty jump to the side.

My children and the man were witnesses recently of an exciting, and, for this section of Massachusetts, a novel race, which, but for them, must certainly have ended fatally. The boys had picked up the morning fall of chestnuts, and were coming through the wood-lot where the man was chopping, when down the hillside toward them rushed a little chipmunk, his teeth a-chatter with terror, for close behind him, with the easy wavy motion of a shadow, glided a dark brown animal, which the man took on the instant for a mink, but which must have been a large weasel or a pine marten. When almost at the feet of the boys, and about to be seized by the marten, the squeaking chipmunk ran up a tree. Up glided the marten, up for twenty feet. Then the chipmunk jumped. It was a fearfully close call. The marten did not dare to jump, but turned and started down, when the man intercepted him with a stick. Around and around the tree he dodged, growling and snarling and avoiding the stick, not a bit abashed, stubbornly holding his own, until forced to seek refuge among the branches. Meanwhile the terrified chipmunk had recovered his nerve and sat quietly watching the sudden turn of affairs from a near-by stump.

I climbed into the cupola of the barn this morning, as I frequently do throughout the winter, and brought down a dazed junco that was beating his life out up there against the window-panes. He lay on his back in my open hand, either feigning death or really powerless with fear. His eyes were closed, his whole tiny body throbbing convulsively with his throbbing heart. Taking him to the door, I turned him over and gave him a gentle toss. Instantly his wings flashed, they zigzagged him for a yard or two, then bore him swiftly around the corner of the house and dropped him in the midst of

his fellows, where they were feeding upon the lawn. He shaped himself up a little and fell to picking with the others.

From a state of collapse the laws of his being had brought the bird into normal behavior as quickly and completely as the collapsed rubber ball is rounded by the laws of its being. The memory of the fright seems to have been an impression exactly like the dent in the rubber ball – as if it had never been.

Yet the analogy only half holds. Memories of the most tenacious kind the animals surely have; but little or no voluntary, unaided power to use them. Memory is largely a mechanical, a crank process with the animals, a kind of magic-lantern show, where the concrete slide is necessary for the picture on the screen; else the past as the future hangs a blank. The dog will sometimes seem to cherish a grudge; so will the elephant. Some one injures or wrongs him, and the huge beast harbors the memory, broods it, and waits his opportunity for revenge. Yet the records of these cases usually show the creature to be living with the object of his hatred – keeper or animal – and that his memory goes no further back than the present moment, than the sight of the enemy; memory always taking an immediate, concrete shape.

At my railroad station I frequently see a yoke of great sleepy, bald-faced oxen, that look as much alike as two blackbirds. Their driver knows them apart; but as they stand there bound to one another by the heavy bar across their foreheads, it would puzzle anybody else to tell Buck from Berry. But not if he approach them wearing an overcoat. At sight of me in an overcoat the off ox will snort and back and thresh about in terror, twisting the head of his yoke-fellow, nearly breaking his neck, and trampling him miserably. But the nigh ox is used to it. He chews and blinks away placidly, keeps his feet the best he can, and doesn't try to understand at all why great-coats should so frighten his cud-chewing brother. I will drop off my coat and go up immediately to smooth the muzzles of both oxen, blinking sleepily while the lumber is being loaded on.

Years ago, the driver told me, the off ox was badly frightened by a big woolly coat, the sight or smell of which suggested to the creature some natural enemy, a panther, perhaps, or a bear. The memory remained, but beyond recall except in the presence of its first cause, the great-coat.

To us, and momentarily to the lower animals, no doubt, there is a monstrous, a desperate aspect to nature – night and drouth and cold, the lightning, the hurricane, the earthquake: phases of nature that to the scientific mind are often appalling, and to the unthinking and superstitious are usually sinister, cruel, personal, leading to much dark talk of banshees and of the mysteries of Providence – as if there were still necessity to justify the ways of God to man! We are clutched by these terrors even as the junco was clutched in my goblin hand. When the mighty fingers open, we zigzag, dazed from the danger; but fall to planning, before the tremors of the earth have ceased, how we can build a greater and finer city on the ruins of the old. Upon the crumbled heap of the second Messina the third will rise, and upon that the fourth, unless the quaking site is forever swallowed by the sea. Terror can kill the living, but it cannot hinder them from forgetting, or prevent them from hoping, or, for more than an instant, stop them from doing. Such is the law of being – the law of the Jungle, of Heaven, of my pastures, of myself, and of the little junco. The light of the sun may burn out, motion may cease, matter vanish away, and life come to an end; but so long as life continues it must continue to assert itself, to obey the law of being – to multiply and replenish the earth, and rejoice.

Life, like Law and Matter, is all of one piece. The horse in my stable, the robin, the toad, the beetle, the vine in my garden, the garden itself, and I together with them all, come out of the same divine dust; we all breathe the same divine breath; we have our beings under the same divine law; only they do not know that the law, the breath, and the dust are divine. If I do know, and yet can so readily forget such knowledge, can so hardly cease from being, can so eternally find the purpose, the hope, the joy of life within me, how soon for them, my lowly fellow mortals, must vanish all sight of fear, all memory of pain! And how abiding with them, how compelling, the necessity to live! And in their unquestioning obedience what joy!

The face of the fields is as changeful as the face of a child. Every passing wind, every shifting cloud, every calling bird, every baying hound, every shape, shadow, fragrance, sound, and tremor, are so many emotions reflected there. But if time and experience and pain come, they pass utterly away; for the face of the fields does not grow old or wise or seamed with pain. It is always the face of a child, – asleep in winter, awake in summer, – a face of life and health always, if we will but see what pushes the falling leaves off, what lies in slumber under the covers of the snow; if we will but feel the strength of the north wind, and the wild fierce joy of the fox and hound as they course the turning, tangling paths of the woodlands in their race with one another against the record set by Life.

II TURTLE EGGS FOR AGASSIZ

IT is one of the wonders of the world that so few books are written. With every human being a possible book, and with many a human being capable of becoming more books than the world could contain, is it not amazing that the books of men are so few? And so stupid!

I took down, recently, from the shelves of a great public library, the four volumes of Agassiz's "Contributions to the Natural History of the United States." I doubt if anybody but the charwoman, with her duster, had touched those volumes for twenty-five years. They are an excessively learned, a monumental, an epoch-making work, the fruit of vast and heroic labors, with colored plates on stone, showing the turtles of the United States, and their embryology. The work was published more than half a century ago (by subscription); but it looked old beyond its years – massive, heavy, weathered, as if dug from the rocks. It was difficult to feel that Agassiz could have written it – could have built it, grown it, for the laminated pile had required for its growth the patience and painstaking care of a process of nature, as if it were a kind of printed coral reef. Agassiz do this? The big, human, magnetic man at work upon these pages of capital letters, Roman figures, brackets, and parentheses in explanation of the pages of diagrams and plates! I turned away with a sigh from the weary learning, to read the preface.

When a great man writes a great book he usually flings a preface after it, and thereby saves it, sometimes, from oblivion. Whether so or not, the best things in most books are their prefaces. It was not, however, the quality of the preface to these great volumes that interested me, but rather the wicked waste of durable book-material that went to its making. Reading down through the catalogue of human names and of thanks for help received, I came to a sentence beginning: —

"In New England I have myself collected largely; but I have also received valuable contributions from the late Rev. Zadoc Thompson of Burlington; ... from Mr. D. Henry Thoreau of Concord; ... and from Mr. J. W. P. Jenks of Middleboro'." And then it hastens on with the thanks in order to get to the turtles, as if turtles were the one and only thing of real importance in all the world.

Turtles no doubt are important, extremely important, embryologically, as part of our genealogical tree; but they are away down among the roots of the tree as compared with the late Rev. Zadoc Thompson of Burlington. I happen to know nothing about the Rev. Zadoc, but to me he looks very interesting. Indeed, any reverend gentleman of his name and day who would catch turtles for Agassiz must have been interesting. And as for D. Henry Thoreau, we know he was interesting. The rarest wood-turtle in the United States was not so rare a specimen as this gentleman of Walden Woods and Concord. We are glad even for this line in the preface about him; glad to know that he tried, in this untranscendental way, to serve his day and generation. If Agassiz had only put a chapter in his turtle book about it! But this is the material he wasted, this and more of the same human sort; for the "Mr. J. W. P. Jenks of Middleboro'" (at the end of the quotation) was, some years later, an old college professor of mine, who told me a few of the particulars of his turtle contributions, particulars which Agassiz should have found a place for in his big book. The preface, in another paragraph, says merely that this gentleman sent turtles to Cambridge by the thousands – brief and scanty recognition! For that is not the only thing this gentleman did. On one occasion he sent, not turtles, but turtle *eggs* to Cambridge —*brought* them, I should say; and all there is to show for it, so far as I could discover, is a sectional drawing of a bit of the mesoblastic layer of one of the eggs!

Of course, Agassiz wanted to make that mesoblastic drawing, or some other equally important drawing, and had to have the fresh turtle egg to draw it from. He had to have it, and he got it. A great man, when he wants a certain turtle egg, at a certain time, always gets it, for he gets some one else to get it. I am glad he got it. But what makes me sad and impatient is that he did not think it worth

while to tell about the getting of it, and so made merely a learned turtle book of what might have been an exceedingly interesting human book.

It would seem, naturally, that there could be nothing unusual or interesting about the getting of turtle eggs when you want them. Nothing at all, if you should chance to want the eggs as you chance to find them. So with anything else, – good copper stock, for instance, if you should chance to want it, and should chance to be along when they chance to be giving it away. But if you want copper stock, say of C & H quality, *when* you want it, and are bound to have it, then you must command more than a college professor's salary. And likewise, precisely, when it is turtle eggs that you are bound to have.

Agassiz wanted those turtle eggs when he wanted them – not a minute over three hours from the minute they were laid. Yet even that does not seem exacting, hardly more difficult than the getting of hen eggs only three hours old. Just so, provided the professor could have had his private turtle-coop in Harvard Yard; and provided he could have made his turtles lay. But turtles will not respond, like hens, to meat-scraps and the warm mash. The professor's problem was not to get from a mud turtle's nest in the back yard to the table in the laboratory; but to get from the laboratory in Cambridge to some pond when the turtles were laying, and back to the laboratory within the limited time. And this, in the days of Darius Green, might have called for nice and discriminating work – as it did.

Agassiz had been engaged for a long time upon his "Contributions." He had brought the great work nearly to a finish. It was, indeed, finished but for one small yet very important bit of observation: he had carried the turtle egg through every stage of its development with the single exception of one – the very earliest – that stage of first cleavages, when the cell begins to segment, immediately upon its being laid. That beginning stage had brought the "Contributions" to a halt. To get eggs that were fresh enough to show the incubation at this period had been impossible.

There were several ways that Agassiz might have proceeded: he might have got a leave of absence for the spring term, taken his laboratory to some pond inhabited by turtles, and there camped until he should catch the reptile digging out her nest. But there were difficulties in all of that – as those who are college professors and naturalists know. As this was quite out of the question, he did the easiest thing – asked Mr. Jenks of Middleboro' to get him the eggs. Mr. Jenks got them. Agassiz knew all about his getting of them; and I say the strange and irritating thing is, that Agassiz did not think it worth while to tell us about it, at least in the preface to his monumental work.

It was many years later that Mr. Jenks, then a gray-haired college professor, told me how he got those eggs to Agassiz.

"I was principal of an academy, during my younger years," he began, "and was busy one day with my classes, when a large man suddenly filled the doorway of the room, smiled to the four corners of the room, and called out with a big, quick voice that he was Professor Agassiz.

"Of course he was. I knew it, even before he had had time to shout it to me across the room.

"Would I get him some turtle eggs? he called. Yes, I would. And would I get them to Cambridge within three hours from the time they were laid? Yes, I would. And I did. And it was worth the doing. But I did it only once.

"When I promised Agassiz those eggs I knew where I was going to get them. I had got turtle eggs there before – at a particular patch of sandy shore along a pond, a few miles distant from the academy.

"Three hours was the limit. From my railroad station to Boston was thirty-five miles; from the pond to the station was perhaps three or four miles; from Boston to Cambridge we called about three miles. Forty miles in round numbers! We figured it all out before he returned, and got the trip down to two hours, – record time: driving from the pond to the station; from the station by express train to Boston; from Boston by cab to Cambridge. This left an easy hour for accidents and delays.

"Cab and car and carriage we reckoned into our time-table; but what we didn't figure on was the turtle." And he paused abruptly.

“Young man,” he went on, his shaggy brows and spectacles hardly hiding the twinkle in the eyes that were bent severely upon me, “young man, when *you* go after turtle eggs, take into account the turtle. No! no! that’s bad advice. Youth never reckons on the turtle – and youth seldom ought to. Only old age does that; and old age would never have got those turtle eggs to Agassiz.

“It was in the early spring that Agassiz came to the academy, long before there was any likelihood of the turtles laying. But I was eager for the quest, and so fearful of failure, that I started out to watch at the pond fully two weeks ahead of the time that the turtles might be expected to lay. I remember the date clearly: it was May 14.

“A little before dawn – along near three o’clock – I would drive over to the pond, hitch my horse near by, settle myself quietly among some thick cedars close to the sandy shore, and there I would wait, my kettle of sand ready, my eye covering the whole sleeping pond. Here among the cedars I would eat my breakfast, and then get back in good season to open the academy for the morning session.

“And so the watch began.

“I soon came to know individually the dozen or more turtles that kept to my side of the pond. Shortly after the cold mist would lift and melt away, they would stick up their heads through the quiet water; and as the sun slanted down over the ragged rim of treetops, the slow things would float into the warm, lighted spots, or crawl out and doze comfortably on the hummocks and snags.

“What fragrant mornings those were! How fresh and new and unbreathed! The pond odors, the woods odors, the odors of the ploughed fields – of water-lily, and wild grape, and the dew-laid soil! I can taste them yet, and hear them yet – the still, large sounds of the waking day – the pickerel breaking the quiet with his swirl; the kingfisher dropping anchor; the stir of feet and wings among the trees. And then the thought of the great book being held up for me! Those were rare mornings!

“But there began to be a good many of them, for the turtles showed no desire to lay. They sprawled in the sun, and never one came out upon the sand as if she intended to help on the great professor’s book. The embryology of her eggs was of small concern to her; her Contribution to the Natural History of the United States could wait.

“And it did wait. I began my watch on the 14th of May; June 1st found me still among the cedars, still waiting, as I had waited every morning, Sundays and rainy days alike. June 1st was a perfect morning, but every turtle slid out upon her log, as if egg-laying might be a matter strictly of next year.

“I began to grow uneasy, – not impatient yet, for a naturalist learns his lesson of patience early, and for all his years; but I began to fear lest, by some subtle sense, my presence might somehow be known to the creatures; that they might have gone to some other place to lay, while I was away at the schoolroom.

“I watched on to the end of the first week, on to the end of the second week in June, seeing the mists rise and vanish every morning, and along with them vanish, more and more, the poetry of my early morning vigil. Poetry and rheumatism cannot long dwell together in the same clump of cedars, and I had begun to feel the rheumatism. A month of morning mists wrapping me around had at last soaked through to my bones. But Agassiz was waiting, and the world was waiting, for those turtle eggs; and I would wait. It was all I could do, for there is no use bringing a china nest-egg to a turtle; she is not open to any such delicate suggestion.

“Then came the mid-June Sunday morning, with dawn breaking a little after three: a warm, wide-awake dawn, with the level mist lifted from the level surface of the pond a full hour higher than I had seen it any morning before.

“This was the day. I knew it. I have heard persons say that they can hear the grass grow; that they know by some extra sense when danger is nigh. That we have these extra senses I fully believe, and I believe they can be sharpened by cultivation. For a month I had been brooding over this pond,

and now I knew. I felt a stirring of the pulse of things that the cold-hearted turtles could no more escape than could the clods and I.

“Leaving my horse unhitched, as if he, too, understood, I slipped eagerly into my covert for a look at the pond. As I did so, a large pickerel ploughed a furrow out through the spatter-docks, and in his wake rose the head of an enormous turtle. Swinging slowly around, the creature headed straight for the shore, and without a pause scrambled out on the sand.

“She was about the size of a big scoop-shovel; but that was not what excited me, so much as her manner, and the gait at which she moved; for there was method in it and fixed purpose. On she came, shuffling over the sand toward the higher open fields, with a hurried, determined see-saw that was taking her somewhere in particular, and that was bound to get her there on time.

“I held my breath. Had she been a dinosaurian making Mesozoic footprints, I could not have been more fearful. For footprints in the Mesozoic mud, or in the sands of time, were as nothing to me when compared with fresh turtle eggs in the sands of this pond.

“But over the strip of sand, without a stop, she paddled, and up a narrow cow-path into the high grass along a fence. Then up the narrow cow-path, on all fours, just like another turtle, I paddled, and into the high wet grass along the fence.

“I kept well within sound of her, for she moved recklessly, leaving a trail of flattened grass a foot and a half wide. I wanted to stand up, – and I don’t believe I could have turned her back with a rail, – but I was afraid if she saw me that she might return indefinitely to the pond; so on I went, flat to the ground, squeezing through the lower rails of the fence, as if the field beyond were a melon-patch. It was nothing of the kind, only a wild, uncomfortable pasture, full of dewberry vines, and very discouraging. They were excessively wet vines and briery. I pulled my coat-sleeves as far over my fists as I could get them, and with the tin pail of sand swinging from between my teeth to avoid noise, I stumped fiercely but silently on after the turtle.

“She was laying her course, I thought, straight down the length of this dreadful pasture, when, not far from the fence, she suddenly hove to, warped herself short about, and came back, barely clearing me, at a clip that was thrilling. I warped about, too, and in her wake bore down across the corner of the pasture, across the powdery public road, and on to a fence along a field of young corn.

“I was somewhat wet by this time, but not so wet as I had been before wallowing through the deep dry dust of the road. Hurrying up behind a large tree by the fence, I peered down the corn-rows and saw the turtle stop, and begin to paw about in the loose soft soil. She was going to lay!

“I held on to the tree and watched, as she tried this place, and that place, and the other place – the eternally feminine! – But *the* place, evidently, was hard to find. What could a female turtle do with a whole field of possible nests to choose from? Then at last she found it, and whirling about, she backed quickly at it, and, tail first, began to bury herself before my staring eyes.

“Those were not the supreme moments of my life; perhaps those moments came later that day; but those certainly were among the slowest, most dreadfully mixed of moments that I ever experienced. They were hours long. There she was, her shell just showing, like some old hulk in the sand along shore. And how long would she stay there? and how should I know if she had laid an egg?

“I could still wait. And so I waited, when, over the freshly awakened fields, floated four mellow strokes from the distant town clock.

“Four o’clock! Why, there was no train until seven! No train for three hours! The eggs would spoil! Then with a rush it came over me that this was Sunday morning, and there was no regular seven o’clock train, – none till after nine.

“I think I should have fainted had not the turtle just then begun crawling off. I was weak and dizzy; but there, there in the sand, were the eggs! and Agassiz! and the great book! And I cleared the fence, and the forty miles that lay between me and Cambridge, at a single jump. He should have them, trains or no. Those eggs should go to Agassiz by seven o’clock, if I had to gallop every mile of the

way. Forty miles! Any horse could cover it in three hours, if he had to; and upsetting the astonished turtle, I scooped out her round white eggs.

“On a bed of sand in the bottom of the pail I laid them, with what care my trembling fingers allowed; filled in between them with more sand; so with another layer to the rim; and covering all smoothly with more sand, I ran back for my horse.

“That horse knew, as well as I, that the turtles had laid, and that he was to get those eggs to Agassiz. He turned out of that field into the road on two wheels, a thing he had not done for twenty years, doubling me up before the dashboard, the pail of eggs miraculously lodged between my knees.

“I let him out. If only he could keep this pace all the way to Cambridge! or even halfway there; and I would have time to finish the trip on foot. I shouted him on, holding to the dasher with one hand, the pail of eggs with the other, not daring to get off my knees, though the bang on them, as we pounded down the wood-road, was terrific. But nothing must happen to the eggs; they must not be jarred, or even turned over in the sand before they came to Agassiz.

“In order to get out on the pike it was necessary to drive back away from Boston toward the town. We had nearly covered the distance, and were rounding a turn from the woods into the open fields, when, ahead of me, at the station it seemed, I heard the quick sharp whistle of a locomotive.

“What did it mean? Then followed the *puff, puff, puff*, of a starting train. But what train? Which way going? And jumping to my feet for a longer view, I pulled into a side road, that paralleled the track, and headed hard for the station.

“We reeled along. The station was still out of sight, but from behind the bushes that shut it from view, rose the smoke of a moving engine. It was perhaps a mile away, but we were approaching, head on, and topping a little hill I swept down upon a freight train, the black smoke pouring from the stack, as the mighty creature got itself together for its swift run down the rails.

“My horse was on the gallop, going with the track, and straight toward the coming train. The sight of it almost maddened me – the bare thought of it, on the road to Boston! On I went; on it came, a half – a quarter of a mile between us, when suddenly my road shot out along an unfenced field with only a level stretch of sod between me and the engine.

“With a pull that lifted the horse from his feet, I swung him into the field and sent him straight as an arrow for the track. That train should carry me and my eggs to Boston!

“The engineer pulled the rope. He saw me standing up in the rig, saw my hat blow off, saw me wave my arms, saw the tin pail swing in my teeth, and he jerked out a succession of sharp halts! But it was he who should halt, not I; and on we went, the horse with a flounder landing the carriage on top of the track.

“The train was already grinding to a stop; but before it was near a standstill, I had backed off the track, jumped out, and, running down the rails with the astonished engineers gaping at me, swung aboard the cab.

“They offered no resistance; they hadn’t had time. Nor did they have the disposition, for I looked strange, not to say dangerous. Hatless, dew-soaked, smeared with yellow mud, and holding, as if it were a baby or a bomb, a little tin pail of sand.

“‘Crazy,’ the fireman muttered, looking to the engineer for his cue.

“I had been crazy, perhaps, but I was not crazy now.

“‘Throw her wide open,’ I commanded. ‘Wide open! These are fresh turtle eggs for Professor Agassiz of Cambridge. He must have them before breakfast.’

“Then they knew I was crazy, and evidently thinking it best to humor me, threw the throttle wide open, and away we went.

“I kissed my hand to the horse, grazing unconcernedly in the open field, and gave a smile to my crew. That was all I could give them, and hold myself and the eggs together. But the smile was enough. And they smiled through their smut at me, though one of them held fast to his shovel, while the other kept his hand upon a big ugly wrench. Neither of them spoke to me, but above the roar of

the swaying engine I caught enough of their broken talk to understand that they were driving under a full head of steam, with the intention of handing me over to the Boston police, as perhaps the safest way of disposing of me.

“I was only afraid that they would try it at the next station. But that station whizzed past without a bit of slack, and the next, and the next; when it came over me that this was the through freight, which should have passed in the night, and was making up lost time.

“Only the fear of the shovel and the wrench kept me from shaking hands with both men at this discovery. But I beamed at them; and they at me. I was enjoying it. The unwonted jar beneath my feet was wrinkling my diaphragm with spasms of delight. And the fireman beamed at the engineer, with a look that said, ‘See the lunatic grin; he likes it!’

“He did like it. How the iron wheels sang to me as they took the rails! How the rushing wind in my ears sang to me! From my stand on the fireman’s side of the cab I could catch a glimpse of the track just ahead of the engine, where the ties seemed to leap into the throat of the mile-devouring monster. The joy of it! of seeing space swallowed by the mile!

“I shifted the eggs from hand to hand and thought of my horse, of Agassiz, of the great book, of my great luck, – luck, – luck, – until the multitudinous tongues of the thundering train were all chiming ‘luck! luck! luck!’ They knew! they understood! This beast of fire and tireless wheels was doing its best to get the eggs to Agassiz!

“We swung out past the Blue Hills, and yonder flashed the morning sun from the towering dome of the State House. I might have leaped from the cab and run the rest of the way on foot, had I not caught the eye of the engineer watching me narrowly. I was not in Boston yet, nor in Cambridge either. I was an escaped lunatic, who had held up a train, and forced it to carry me to Boston.

“Perhaps I had overdone the lunacy business. Suppose these two men should take it into their heads to turn me over to the police, whether I would or no? I could never explain the case in time to get the eggs to Agassiz. I looked at my watch. There were still a few minutes left, in which I might explain to these men, who, all at once, had become my captors. But it was too late. Nothing could avail against my actions, my appearance, and my little pail of sand.

“I had not thought of my appearance before. Here I was, face and clothes caked with yellow mud, my hair wild and matted, my hat gone, and in my full-grown hands a tiny tin pail of sand, as if I had been digging all night with a tiny tin shovel on the shore! And thus to appear in the decent streets of Boston of a Sunday morning!

“I began to feel like a lunatic. The situation was serious, or might be, and rather desperately funny at its best. I must in some way have shown my new fears, for both men watched me more sharply.

“Suddenly, as we were nearing the outer freight-yard, the train slowed down and came to a stop. I was ready to jump, but I had no chance. They had nothing to do, apparently, but to guard me. I looked at my watch again. What time we had made! It was only six o’clock, with a whole hour to get to Cambridge.

“But I didn’t like this delay. Five minutes – ten – went by.

“‘Gentlemen,’ I began, but was cut short by an express train coming past. We were moving again, on – into a siding; on – on to the main track; and on with a bump and a crash and a succession of crashes, running the length of the train; on at a turtle’s pace, but on, – when the fireman, quickly jumping for the bell-rope, left the way to the step free, and – the chance had come!

“I never touched the step, but landed in the soft sand at the side of the track, and made a line for the yard fence.

“There was no hue or cry. I glanced over my shoulder to see if they were after me. Evidently their hands were full, and they didn’t know I had gone.

“But I had gone; and was ready to drop over the high board-fence, when it occurred to me that I might drop into a policeman’s arms. Hanging my pail in a splint on top of a post, I peered cautiously

over – a very wise thing to do before you jump a high board-fence. There, crossing the open square toward the station, was a big burly fellow with a club – looking for me.

“I flattened for a moment, when some one in the yard yelled at me. I preferred the policeman, and grabbing my pail I slid over to the street. The policeman moved on past the corner of the station out of sight. The square was free, and yonder stood a cab!

“Time was flying now. Here was the last lap. The cabman saw me coming, and squared away. I waved a paper dollar at him, but he only stared the more. A dollar can cover a good deal, but I was too much for one dollar. I pulled out another, thrust them both at him, and dodged into the cab, calling, ‘Cambridge!’

“He would have taken me straight to the police station, had I not said, ‘Harvard College. Professor Agassiz’s house! I’ve got eggs for Agassiz’; and pushed another dollar up at him through the hole.

“It was nearly half-past six.

“‘Let him go!’ I ordered. ‘Here’s another dollar if you make Agassiz’s house in twenty minutes. Let him out. Never mind the police!’

“He evidently knew the police, or there were few around at that time on a Sunday morning. We went down the sleeping streets, as I had gone down the wood-roads from the pond two hours before, but with the rattle and crash now of a fire brigade. Whirling a corner into Cambridge Street, we took the bridge at a gallop, the driver shouting out something in Hibernian to a pair of waving arms and a belt and brass buttons.

“Across the bridge with a rattle and jolt that put the eggs in jeopardy, and on over the cobblestones, we went. Half-standing, to lessen the jar, I held the pail in one hand and held myself in the other, not daring to let go even to look at my watch.

“But I was afraid to look at the watch. I was afraid to see how near to seven o’clock it might be. The sweat was dropping from my nose, so close was I running to the limit of my time.

“Suddenly there was a lurch, and I dove forward, ramming my head into the front of the cab, coming up with a rebound that landed me across the small of my back on the seat, and sent half of my pail of eggs helter-skelter over the floor.

“We had stopped. Here was Agassiz’s house; and not taking time to pick up the scattered eggs, I tumbled out, and pounded at the door.

“No one was astir in the house. But I would stir them. And I did. Right in the midst of the racket the door opened. It was the maid.

“‘Agassiz,’ I gasped, ‘I want Professor Agassiz, quick!’ And I pushed by her into the hall.

“‘Go ’way, sir. I’ll call the police. Professor Agassiz is in bed. Go ’way, sir.’

“‘Call him – Agassiz – instantly, or I’ll call him myself!’

“But I didn’t; for just then a door overhead was flung open, a white-robed figure appeared on the dim landing above, and a quick loud voice called excitedly, —

“‘Let him in! Let him in! I know him. He has my turtle eggs!’

“And the apparition, slipperless, and clad in anything but an academic gown, came sailing down the stairs.

“The maid fled. The great man, his arms extended, laid hold of me with both hands, and dragging me and my precious pail into his study, with a swift, clean stroke laid open one of the eggs, as the watch in my trembling hands ticked its way to seven – as if nothing unusual were happening to the history of the world.”

“You were in time then?” I said.

“To the tick. There stands my copy of the great book. I am proud of the humble part I had in it.”

III

THE EDGE OF NIGHT

BEYOND the meadow, nearly half a mile away, yet in sight from my window, stands an apple tree, the last of an ancient line that once marked the boundary between the upper and lower pastures. For an apple tree it is unspeakably woeful, and bent, and hoary, and grizzled, with suckers from feet to crown. Unkempt and unesteemed, it attracts only the cattle for its shade, and gives to them alone its gnarly, bitter fruit.

But that old tree is hollow, trunk and limb; and if its apples are of Sodom, there is still no tree in the Garden of the Hesperides, none even in my own private Eden, carefully kept as they are, that is half as interesting – I had almost said, as useful. Among the trees of the Lord, an apple tree that bears good Baldwins or greenings or rambos comes first for usefulness; but when one has thirty-five of such trees, which the town has compelled one to trim and scrape and plaster-up and petticoat against the grewsome gypsy moth, then those thirty-five are dull indeed, compared with the untrimmed, unscraped, unplastered, undressed old tramp yonder on the knoll, whose heart is still wide open to the birds and beasts – to every small traveler passing by who needs, perforce, a home, a hiding, or a harbor.

When I was a small boy everybody used to put up overnight at grandfather's – for grandmother's wit and buckwheat cakes, I think, which were known away down into Cape May County. It was so, too, with grandfather's wisdom and brooms. The old house sat in behind a grove of pin-oak and pine, a sheltered, sheltering spot, with a peddler's stall in the barn, a peddler's place at the table, a peddler's bed in the herby garret, a boundless, fathomless feather-bed, of a piece with the house and the hospitality. There were larger houses and newer, in the neighborhood; but no other house in all the region, not even the tavern, two miles farther down the Pike, was half as central, or as homelike, or as full of sweet and juicy gossip.

The old apple tree yonder between the woods and the meadow is as central, as hospitable, and, if animals communicate with one another, just as full of neighborhood news as was grandfather's roof-tree.

Did I say none but the cattle seek its shade? Go over and watch. That old tree is no decrepit, deserted shack of a house. There is no door-plate, there is no christened letter-box outside the front fence, because the birds and beasts do not advertise their houses that way. But go over, say, toward evening, and sit quietly down outside. You will not wait long, for the doors will open that you may enter – enter into a home of the fields, and, a little way at least, into a life of the fields, for this old tree has a small dweller of some sort the year round.

If it is February or March you will be admitted by my owls. They take possession late in winter and occupy the tree, with some curious fellow tenants, until early summer. I can count upon these small screech-owls by February, – the forlorn month, the seasonless, hopeless, lifeless stretch of the year, but for its owls, its thaws, its lengthening days, its cackling pullets, its possibility of swallows, and its being the year's end. At least the ancients called February the year's end, maintaining, with fine poetic sense, that the world was begun in March; and they were nearer the beginnings of things than we are.

But the owls come in February, and if they are not swallows with the spring, they, nevertheless, help winter with most seemly haste into an early grave. Yet across the faded February meadow the old apple tree stands empty and drear enough – until the shadows of the night begin to fall.

As the dusk comes down, I go to my window and watch. I cannot see him, the grim-beaked baron with his hooked talons, his ghostly wings, his night-seeing eyes; but I know that he has come to his window in the turret yonder on the darkening sky, and that he watches with me. I cannot see

him swoop downward over the ditches, nor see him quarter the meadow, beating, dangling, dropping between the flattened tussocks; nor hear him, back on the silent shadows, slant upward again to his turret. Mine are human eyes, human ears. Even the quick-eared meadow-mouse did not hear.

But I have been belated and forced to cross this wild night-land of his; and I have *felt* him pass – so near at times that he has stirred my hair, by the wind, dare I say, of his mysterious wings? At other times I have heard him. Often on the edge of night I have listened to his quavering, querulous cry from the elm-tops below me by the meadow. But oftener I have watched at the casement here in my castle wall.

Away yonder on the borders of night, dim and gloomy, looms his ancient keep. I wait. Soon on the deepened dusk spread his soft wings, out over the meadow he sails, up over my wooded height, over my moat, to my turret tall, as silent and unseen as the soul of a shadow, except he drift across the face of the full round moon, or with his weird cry cause the dreaming quiet to stir in its sleep and moan.

Yes, yes, but one must be pretty much of a child, with most of his childish things not yet put away, to get any such romance out of a rotten apple tree, plus a bunch of feathers no bigger than one's two fists. One must be pretty far removed from the real world, the live world that swings, no longer through the heavens, but at the distributing end of a news wire – pretty far removed to spend one's precious time watching screech-owls.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.