

INTRODUCTION

THOREAU was a man of his own kind. Many things may be said of him, favorable and unfavorable, but this must surely be said first,—that, taken for all in all, he was like nobody else. Taken for all in all, be it remarked. Other men have despised common sense; other men have chosen to be poor, and, as between physical comfort and better things, have made light of physical comfort; other men, whether to their credit or discredit, have held and expressed a contemptuous opinion of their neighbors and all their neighbors' doings; others, a smaller number, believing in an absolute goodness and in a wisdom transcending human knowledge, have distrusted the world as evil, accounting its influence degrading, its prudence no better than cowardice, its wisdom a kind of folly, its morality a compromise, its religion a bargain, its possessions a defilement and a hindrance, and so judging of the world, have striven at all cost to live above it and apart. And some, no doubt, have loved Nature as a mistress, fleeing to her from less congenial company, and devoting a lifetime to the observation and enjoyment of her ways. In no one of these particulars was the hermit of Walden without forerunners; but taken for all that he was, poet, idealist, stoic, cynic, naturalist, spiritualist, lover of purity, seeker of perfection, panegyrist of friendship and dweller in a hermitage, freethinker and saint, where shall we look to find his fellow? It seems but the plainest statement of

fact to say that, as there was none before him, so there is scanty prospect of any to come after him.

His profession was literature; as to that there is no sign that he was ever in doubt; and he understood from the first that for a writing man nothing could take the place of practice, partly because that is the one means of acquiring ease of expression, and partly because a man often has no suspicion of his own thoughts until his pen discovers them; and almost from the first — a friend (Emerson or another) having given him the hint — he had come to feel that no practice is better or readier than the keeping of a journal, a daily record of things thought, seen, and felt. Such a record he began soon after leaving college, and (being one of a thousand in this respect as in others) he continued it to the end. By good fortune he left it behind him, and, to complete the good fortune, it is at last printed, no longer in selections, but as a whole; and if a man is curious to know what such an original, plain-spoken, perfection-seeking, convention-despising, dogma-disbelieving, wisdom-loving, sham-hating, Nature-worshipping, poverty-proud genius was in the habit of confiding to so patient a listener at the close of the day, he has only to read the book.

The man himself is there. Something of him, indeed, is to be discovered, one half imagines, in the outward aspect of the thirty-nine manuscript volumes: ordinary "blank-books" of the sort furnished by country shopkeepers fifty or sixty years ago, larger or smaller as might happen, and of varying shapes (a customer seeking such wares must not be too particular; one remembers Thoreau's complaint that the universal preoccupation

with questions of money rendered it difficult for him to find a blank-book that was not ruled for dollars and cents), still neatly packed in the strong wooden box which their owner, a workman needing not to be ashamed, made with his own hands on purpose to hold them.

A pretty full result of a short life they seem to be, as one takes up volume after volume (the largest are found to contain about a hundred thousand words) and turns the leaves: the handwriting strong and rapid, leaning well forward in its haste, none too legible, slow reading at the best, with here and there a word that is almost past making out; the orthography that of a naturally good speller setting down his thoughts at full speed and leaving his mistakes behind him; and the punctuation, to call it such, no better than a makeshift, — after the model of Sterne's, if one chooses to say so: a spattering of dashes, and little else.¹

As for the matter, it is more carefully considered, less strictly improvised, than is customary with diarists. It is evident, in fact, from references here and there, that many of the entries were copied from an earlier pencilled draft, made presumably in the field, "with the eye on the

¹ In many cases the punctuation seems to be absolutely without significance; as if the writer had simply fallen into the habit of dropping dashes in an absent-minded way as he passed along. The following examples (the longest an extreme case) will show what is meant: —

"I heard from time to time — a new note."

"The *Equisetum sylvaticum* — there is now of a reddish cast."

"It is very difficult — to find a suitable place to camp near the road — affording — water — a good — prospect and retirement."

"Another alighted near — by — and a third a little further off."

object," while the work as a whole has been more or less carefully revised, with erasures, emendations, and suggested alternative readings.

As we have said, if a man wishes to know Thoreau as he was, let him read the book. One thing he may be sure of: he will find himself in clean, self-respecting company, with no call to blush, as if he were playing the eavesdropper. Of confessions, indeed, in the spicy sense of the word, Thoreau had none to make. He was no Montaigne, no Rousseau, no Samuel Pepys. How should he be? He was a Puritan of Massachusetts, though he kept no Sabbath, was seen in no church, — being very different from Mr. Pepys in more ways than one, — and esteemed the Hebrew scriptures as a good book like any other. Once, indeed, when he was thirty-four years old, he went to a "party." For anything we know, that (with a little sowing of wild oats in the matter of smoking dried lily-stems when a boy) was as near as he ever came to dissipation. And he did not like it. "It is a bad place to go to," he says, — "thirty or forty persons, mostly young women, in a small room, warm and noisy." One of the young women was reputed to be "pretty-looking;" but he scarcely looked at her, though he was "introduced," and he could not hear what she said, because there was "such a clacking." "I could imagine better places for conversation," he goes on, "where there should be a certain degree of silence surrounding you, and less than forty talking at once. Why, this afternoon, even, I did better. There was old Mr. Joseph Hosmer and I ate our luncheon of cracker and cheese together in the woods. I heard all he said, though

it was not much, to be sure, and he could hear me. And then he talked out of such a glorious repose, taking a leisurely bite at the cracker and cheese between his words; and so some of him was communicated to me, and some of me to him, I trust."

He entertains a shrewd suspicion that assemblies of this kind are got up with a view to matrimonial alliances among the young people! For his part, at all events, he does n't understand "the use of going to see people whom yet you never see, and who never see you." Some of his friends make a singular blunder. They go out of their way to talk to pretty young women *as such*. Their prettiness may be a reason for looking at them, so much he will concede, — for the sake of the antithesis, if for nothing else, — but why is it any reason for talking to them? For himself, though he may be "lacking a sense in this respect," he derives "no pleasure from talking with a young woman half an hour simply because she has regular features."

How crabbed is divine philosophy! After this we are not surprised when he concludes by saying: "The society of young women is the most unprofitable I have ever tried." No, no; he was nothing like Mr. Samuel Pepys.

The sect of young women, we may add, need not feel deeply affronted by this ungallant mention. It is perhaps the only one of its kind in the journal (by its nature restricted to matters interesting to the author), while there are multitudes of passages to prove that Thoreau's aversion to the society of older people taken as they run, men and women alike, was hardly less pronounced. In

truth (and it is nothing of necessity against him), he was not made for "parties," nor for clubs, nor even for general companionship. "I am all without and in sight," said Montaigne, "born for society and friendship." So was not Thoreau. He was all within, born for contemplation and solitude. And what we are born for, that let us be, — and so the will of God be done. Such, for good or ill, was Thoreau's philosophy. "We are constantly invited to be what we are," he said. It is one of his memorable sentences; an admirable summary of Emerson's essay on Self-Reliance.

His fellow mortals, as a rule, did not recommend themselves to him. His thoughts were none the better for their company, as they almost always were for the company of the pine tree and the meadow. Inspiration, a refreshing of the spiritual faculties, as indispensable to him as daily bread, that his fellow mortals did not furnish him. For this state of things he sometimes (once or twice at least) mildly reproaches himself. It may be that he is to blame for so commonly skipping humanity and its affairs; he will seek to amend the fault, he promises. But even at such a moment of exceptional humility, his pen, reversing Balaam's rôle, runs into left-handed compliments that are worse, if anything, than the original offense. Hear him: "I will not avoid to go by where those men are repairing the stone bridge. I will see if I cannot see poetry in that, if that will not yield me a reflection. It is narrow to be confined to woods and fields and grand aspects of nature only. . . . Why not see men standing in the sun and casting a shadow, even as trees? . . . I will try to enjoy them as animals, at least."

This is in 1851. A year afterward we find him concerned with the same theme, but in a less hesitating mood. Now he is on his high horse, with apologies to nobody. "It appears to me," he begins, "that to one standing on the heights of philosophy mankind and the works of man will have sunk out of sight altogether." Man, in his opinion, is "too much insisted upon." "The poet says, 'The proper study of mankind is man.' I say, Study to forget all that. Take wider views of the universe. . . . What is the village, city, state, nation, aye, the civilized world, that it should concern a man so much? The thought of them affects me, in my wisest hours, as when I pass a woodchuck's hole."

A high horse, indeed! But his comparison is really by no means so disparaging as it sounds; for Thoreau took a deep and lasting interest in woodchucks. At one time and another he wrote many good pages about them; for their reappearance in the spring he watched as for the return of a friend, and once, at least, he devoted an hour to digging out a burrow and recording with painstaking minuteness the course and length of its ramifications. A novelist, describing his heroine's boudoir, could hardly have been more strict with himself. In fact, to have said that one of Thoreau's human neighbors was as interesting to him as a woodchuck would have been to pay that neighbor a rather handsome compliment. None of the brute animals, so called, — we have it on his own authority, — ever vexed his ears with pomposity or nonsense.

But we have interrupted his discourse midway. "I do not value any view of the universe into which man and

the institutions of man enter very largely," he continues. . . . "Man is a past phenomenon to philosophy." Then he descends a little to particulars. "Some rarely go outdoors, most are always at home at night," — Concord people being uncommonly well brought up, it would appear, — "very few indeed have stayed out all night once in their lives; fewer still have gone behind the world of humanity and seen its institutions like toadstools by the wayside."

And then, having, with this good bit of philosophical "tall talk," brushed aside humanity as a very little thing, he proceeds to chronicle the really essential facts of the day: that he landed that afternoon on Tall's Island, and to his disappointment found the weather not cold or windy enough for the meadow to make "its most serious impression;" also, that the staddles from which the hay had been removed were found to stand a foot or two above the water; besides which, he saw cranberries on the bottom (although he forgot to mention them in their proper place), and noticed that the steam of the engine looked very white that morning against the hillside.

All which setting of ordinary valuations topsy-turvy, the lords of creation below the beasts that perish, may lead an innocent reader to exclaim with one of old, "Lord, what is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?"

Nevertheless, we must not treat the matter too lightly, easily as it lends itself to persiflage. Even in this extreme instance it is not to be assumed that Thoreau was talking for the sake of talking, or merely keeping his hand in with his favorite rhetorical weapon, a paradox. That

desiderated "serious impression," at all events, was no laughing matter; rather it was to have been the chief event of the day; of more account to Thoreau than dinner and supper both were likely to be to his farmer neighbor. As for the woodchuck, its comparative rank in the scale of animal existence, be it higher or lower, is nothing to the purpose. For Thoreau it was simple truth that, on some days, and in some states of mind, he found the society of such a cave-dweller more acceptable, or less unacceptable, than that of any number of his highly civilized townsmen. Nor is the statement one to be nervously concerned about. Any inveterate stroller, the most matter-of-fact man alive (though matter-of-fact men are not apt to be strollers), might say the same, in all soberness, with no thought of writing himself down a misanthrope, or of setting himself up as a philosopher.

For one thing, the woodchuck is sure to be less intrusive, less distracting, than the ordinary human specimen; he fits in better with solitude and the solitary feeling. He is never in the way. Moreover, you can say to a woodchuck anything that comes into your head, without fear of giving offense; a less important consideration than the other, no doubt, woodchucks as a class not being remarkably conversable, but still worthy of mention. For, naturally enough, an outspoken freethinker like Thoreau found the greater number of men not so very different from "ministers," of whom he said, in a tone of innocent surprise, that they "could not bear all kinds of opinions," — "as if any sincere thought were not the best sort of truth!"

He walked one afternoon with Alcott, and spent an agreeable hour, though for the most part he preferred having the woods and fields to himself. Alcott was an ineffectual genius, he remarks, "forever feeling about vainly in his speech, and touching nothing" (one thinks of Arnold's characterization of Shelley as a "beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain," which, in its turn, may call to mind Lowell's comparison of Shelley's genius to a St. Elmo's fire, "playing in ineffectual flame about the points of his thought"), but after all, he was good company; not quite so good as none, of course, but on the whole, as men go, rather better than most. At least, he would listen to what you had to offer. He was open-minded; he was n't shut up in a creed; an honest man's thought, would not shock him. You could talk to him without running up against "some institution." In a word, — though Thoreau does n't say it, — he was something like a woodchuck.

With all his passion for "that glorious society called solitude," and with all his feeling that mankind, as a "past phenomenon," thought far too highly of itself, it is abundantly in evidence that Thoreau, in his own time and on his own terms, was capable of a really human delight in familiar intercourse with his fellows. Channing, who should have known, speaks, a little vaguely, to be sure, of his "fine social qualities." "Always a genial and hospitable entertainer," he calls him. And Mr. Ricketson, who also should have known, assures us that "no man could hold a finer relationship with his family than he." But of this aspect of his character,

it must be acknowledged, there is comparatively little in the journal. What is very constant and emphatic there — emphatic sometimes to the point of painfulness — is the hermit's hunger and thirst after friendship; a friendship the sweets of which, so far as appears, he was very sparingly to enjoy. For if he was at home in the family group and in huckleberry excursions with children, if he relished to the full a talk with a stray fisherman, a racy-tongued woodchopper, or a good Indian, something very different seems to have been habitual with him when it came to intercourse with equals and friends.

Here, even more than elsewhere, he was an unpromising idealist. His craving was for a friendship more than human, friendship such as it was beyond any one about him to furnish, if it was not, as may fairly be suspected, beyond his own capacity to receive. In respect to outward things, his wealth, he truly said, was to want little. In respect to friendship, his poverty was to want the unattainable. It might have been retorted upon him in his own words, that he was like a man who should complain of hard times because he could not afford to buy himself a crown. But the retort would perhaps have been rather smart than fair. He, at least, would never have acquiesced in it. He confided to his journal again and again that he asked nothing of his friends but honesty, sincerity, a grain of real appreciation, "an opportunity once in a year to speak the truth;" but in the end it came always to this, that he insisted upon perfection, and, not finding it, went on his way hungry. Probably it is true — one seems to divine a reason for it —

that idealists, claimers of the absolute, have commonly found their fellow men a disappointment.

In Thoreau's case it was his best friends who most severely tried his patience. They invite him to see them, he complains, and then "do not show themselves." He "pines and starves near them." All is useless. They treat him so that he "feels a thousand miles off." "I leave my friends early. I go away to cherish my idea of friendship." Surely there is no sentence in all Thoreau's books that is more thoroughly characteristic than that. And how neatly it is turned! Listen also to this, which is equally bitter, and almost equally perfect in the phrasing: "No fields are so barren to me as the men of whom I expect everything, but get nothing. In their neighborhood I experience a painful yearning for society."

It is all a mystery to him. "How happens it," he exclaims, "that I find myself making such an enormous demand on men, and so constantly disappointed? Are my friends aware how disappointed I am? Is it all my fault? Am I incapable of expansion and generosity? I shall accuse myself of anything else sooner." And again he goes away sorrowful, consoling himself, as best he can, with his own paradox, —

"I might have loved him, had I loved him less."

Strange that he should have suffered in this way, many will think, with Emerson himself for a friend and neighbor! Well, the two men were friends, but neither was in this relation quite impeccable (which is as much as to say that both were human), and to judge by such hints as are gatherable on either side, their case was not

entirely unlike that of Bridget Elia and her cousin, — "generally in harmony, with occasional bickerings, as it should be among near relations;" though "bickerings" is no doubt an undignified term for use in this connection. It is interesting, some may deem it amusing, to put side by side the statements of the two men upon this very point; Emerson's communicated to the public shortly after his friend's death, Thoreau's intrusted nine years before to the privacy of his journal.

Emerson's speech is the more guarded, as, for more reasons than one, it might have been expected to be. His friend, he confesses, "was somewhat military in his nature . . . always manly and able, but rarely tender, as if he did not feel himself except in opposition. He wanted a fallacy to expose, a blunder to pillory, I may say required a little sense of victory, a roll of the drum, to call his powers into full exercise. . . . It seemed as if his first instinct on hearing a proposition was to controvert it, so impatient was he of the limitations of our daily thought. This habit, of course, is a little chilling to the social affections; and though the companion would in the end acquit him of any malice or untruth, yet it mars conversation. Hence no equal companion stood in affectionate relations with one so pure and guileless."

Thoreau's entry is dated May 24, 1853. "Talked, or tried to talk, with R. W. E. Lost my time, nay, almost my identity. He, assuming a false opposition where there was no difference of opinion, talked to the wind, told me what I knew, and I lost my time trying to imagine myself somebody else to oppose him."

It is the very same picture, drawn by another pencil,

with a different placing of the shadows; and since the two sketches were made so many years apart and yet seem to be descriptive of the same thing, it is perhaps fair to conclude that this particular interview, which appears to have degenerated into something like a dispute about nothing (a very frequent subject of disputes, by the way), was not exceptional, but rather typical. Without doubt this was one of the occasions when Thoreau felt himself treated as if he were "a thousand miles off," and went home early to "cherish his idea of friendship." Let us hope that he lost nothing else along with his time and identity.

But here, again, we are in danger of an unseasonable lightness. Friendship, according to Thoreau's apprehension of it, was a thing infinitely sacred. A *friend* might move him to petulance, as the best of friends sometimes will; but *friendship*, the ideal state shown to him in dreams, for speech concerning that there was nowhere in English, nor anywhere else, a word sufficiently noble and unsoiled. And even his friends he loved, although, tongue-tied New-Englander that he was, he could never tell them so. He loved them best (and this, likewise, was no singularity) when they were farthest away. In company, even in their company, he could never utter his truest thought. So it is with us all. It was a greater than Thoreau who said, "We descend to meet;" and a greater still, perhaps (and he also a Concord man), who confessed at fifty odd: "I doubt whether I have ever really talked with half a dozen persons in my life."

As for Thoreau, he knew at times, and owned as much

to himself, that his absorption in nature tended to unfit him for human society. But so it was; he loved to be alone. And in this respect he had no thought of change, — no thought nor wish. Whatever happened, he would still belong to no club but the true "country club," which dined "at the sign of the Shrub Oak." The fields and the woods, the old road, the river, and the pond, these were his real neighbors. Year in and year out, how near they were to him! — a nearness unspeakable; till sometimes it seemed as if their being and his were not two, but one and the same. With them was no frivolity, no vulgarity, no changeableness, no prejudice. With them he had no misunderstandings, no meaningless disputes, no disappointments. They knew him, and were known of him. In their society he felt himself renewed. There he lived, and loved his life. There, if anywhere, the Spirit of the Lord came upon him. Hear him, on a cool morning in August, with the wind in the branches and the crickets in the grass, and think of him, if you can, as a being too cold for friendship!

"My heart leaps out of my mouth at the sound of the wind in the woods. I, whose life was but yesterday so desultory and shallow, suddenly recover my spirits, my spirituality, through my hearing. . . . Ah! if I could so live that there should be no desultory moments . . . I would walk, I would sit and sleep, with natural piety. What if I could pray aloud, or to myself, as I went along by the brookside, a cheerful prayer, like the birds! For joy I could embrace the earth. I shall delight to be buried in it. And then, to think of those I love among men, who will know that I love them, though I tell them

not. . . . I thank you, God. I do not deserve anything; I am unworthy of the least regard; and yet the world is gilded for my delight, and holidays are prepared for me, and my path is strewn with flowers. . . . O keep my senses pure!"

Highly characteristic is that concluding ejaculation. For Thoreau the five senses were not organs or means of sensuous gratification, but the five gateways of the soul. He would have them open and undefiled. Upon that point no man was ever more insistent. Above all, no sense must be pampered; else it would lose its native freshness and delicacy, and so its diviner use. That way lay perdition. When a woman came to Concord to lecture, and Thoreau carried her manuscript to the hall for her, wrapped in its owner's handkerchief, he complained twenty-four hours afterward that his pocket "still exhaled cologne." Faint, elusive outdoor odors were not only a continual delight to him, but a positive means of grace.

So, too, he would rather not see any of the scenic wonders of the world. Only let his sense of beauty remain uncorrupted, and he could trust his Musketaquid meadows, and the low hills round about, to feed and satisfy him forever.

Because of his jealousy in this regard, partly, — and partly from ignorance, it may be, just as some of his respectable village acquaintances would have found the *Iliad*, of which he talked so much, duller than death in comparison with the works of Mr. Sylvanus Cobb, — he often spoke in slighting terms of operas and all the more elaborate forms of music. The ear, he thought, if it

were kept innocent, would find satisfaction in the very simplest of musical sounds. For himself, there was no language extravagant enough to express his rapturous delight in them. Now "all the romance of his youth-fulest moment" came flooding back upon him, and anon he was carried away till he "looked under the lids of Time," — all by the humming of telegraph-wires or, at night especially, by the distant baying of a hound.

To the modern "musical person" certain of his confessions under this head are of a character to excite mirth. He is "much indebted," for instance, to a neighbor "who will now and then, in the intervals of his work, draw forth a few strains from his accordion." The neighbor is only a learner, but, says Thoreau, "I find when his strains cease that I have been elevated." His daily philosophy is all of a piece, one perceives: plain fare, plain clothes, plain company, a hut in the woods, an old book, — and for inspiration the notes of a neighbor's accordion.

More than once, too, he acknowledges his obligation to that famous rural entertainer and civilizer, the hand-organ. "All Vienna" could not do more for him, he ventures to think. "It is perhaps the best instrumental music that we have," he observes; which can hardly have been true, even in Concord, one prefers to believe, while admitting the possibility. If it is heard far enough away, he goes on, so that the creaking of the machinery is lost, "it serves the grandest use for me, — it deepens my existence."

We smile, of course, as in duty bound, at so artless an avowal; but, having smiled, we are bound also to render

our opinion that the most *blasé* concert-goer, if he be a man of native sensibility, will readily enough discern what Thoreau has in mind, and with equal readiness will concede to it a measure of reasonableness; for he will have the witness in himself that the effect of music upon the soul depends as much upon the temper of the soul as upon the perfection of the instrument. One day a simple air, simply sung or played, will land him in heaven; and another day the best efforts of the full symphony orchestra will leave him in the mire. And after all, it is possibly better, albeit in "poorer taste," to be transported by the wheezing of an accordion than to be bored by finer music. As for Thoreau, he studied to be a master of the art of living; and in the practice of that art, as of any other, it is the glory of the artist to achieve extraordinary results by ordinary means. To have one's existence deepened — there cannot be many things more desirable than that; and as between our unsophisticated recluse and the average "musical person" aforesaid, the case is perhaps not so one-sided as at first sight it looks; or, if it be, the odds are possibly not always on the side of what seems the greater opportunity.

His life, the quality of his life, that for Thoreau was the paramount concern. To the furthering of that end all things must be held subservient. Nature, man, books, music, all for him had the same use. This one thing he did, — he cultivated himself. If any, because of his so doing, accused him of selfishness, preaching to him of philanthropy, almsgiving, and what not, his answer was already in his mouth. Mankind, he was prepared to maintain, was very well off without such helps, which

oftener than not did as much harm as good (though the concrete case at his elbow — half-clad Johnny Riordan, a fugitive slave, an Irishman who wished to bring his family over — appealed to him as quickly as to most, one is glad to notice); and, however that might be, the world needed a thousand times more than any so-called charity the sight of a man here and there living for higher ends than the world itself knows of. His own course, at any rate, was clear before him: "What I am, I am, and say not. Being is the great explainer."

His life, his *own* life, that he must live; and he must be in earnest about it. He was no indifferent, no little-carer, no skeptic, as if truth and a lie were but varying shades of the same color, and virtue, according to the old phrase, "a mean between vices." You would never catch him sighing, "Oh, well!" or "Who knows?" Qualifications, reconciliations, *rapprochements*, the two sides of the shield, and all that, — these were considerations not in his line. Before everything else he was a believer, — an idealist, that is, — the last person in the world to put up with half-truths or half-way measures. If "existing things" were thus and so, that was no reason why, with the sect of the Sadducees, he should make the best of them. What if there *were* no best of them? What if they were all bad? And anyhow, why not begin new? It was conceivable, was it not, that a man should set his own example, and follow his own copy. General opinion, — what was that? Was a thing better established because ten thousand fools believed it? Did folly become wisdom by being raised to a higher power? And antiquity, tradition, — what were they? Could a blind

man of fifteen centuries ago see farther than a blind man of the present time? And if the blind led the blind, then or now, would not both fall into the ditch?

Yes, he was undoubtedly peculiar. As to that there could never be anything but agreement among practical people. In a world where shiftiness and hesitation are the rule, nothing looks so eccentric as a straight course. It must be acknowledged, too, that a man whose goodness has a strong infusion of the bitter, and whose opinions turn out of the way for nobody, is not apt to be the most comfortable kind of neighbor. We were not greatly surprised, lately, to hear an excellent lady remark of Thoreau that, from all she had read about him, she thought he must have been "a very disagreeable gentleman." It could hardly be said of him, as Mr. Birrell says of Matthew Arnold, who was himself a pretty serious person, and, after a way of his own, a preacher of righteousness, that he "conspired and contrived to make things pleasant."

Being a consistent idealist, he was of course an extremist, falling in that respect little behind the man out of Nazareth, whose hard sayings, by all accounts, were sometimes less acceptable than they might have been, and of whom Thoreau asserted, in his emphatic way, that if his words were really read from any pulpit in the land, "there would not be left one stone of that meeting-house upon another." Thoreau worshipped purity, and the every-day ethical standards of the street were to him an abomination. "There are certain current expressions and blasphemous moods of viewing things," he declares, "as when we say 'he is doing a good busi-

ness,' more profane than cursing and swearing. There is death and sin in such words. Let not the children hear them." That innocent-sounding phrase about "a good business" — as if a business might be taken for granted as good because it brought in money — was as abhorrent to him as the outrageous worldly philosophy of an old castaway like Major Pendennis is to the ordinarily sensitive reader.

He was constitutionally earnest. There are pages of the journal, indeed, which make one feel that perhaps he was in danger of being too much so for his own profit. Possibly it is not quite wholesome, possibly, if one dares to say it, it begets a something like priggishness, for the soul to be keyed up continually to so strenuous a pitch. In Thoreau's case, at all events, one is glad for every sign of a slackening of the tension. "Set the red hen to-day;" "Got green grapes to stew;" "Painted the bottom of my boat;" trivialities like these, too far apart (one is tempted to colloquialize, and call them "precious few," finding them so infrequent and so welcome), strike the reader with a sudden sensation of relief, as if he had been wading to the chin, and all at once his feet had touched a shallow.

So, too, one is thankful to come upon a really amusing dissertation about the tying of shoe-strings, or rather about their too easy untying; a matter with which, it appears, Thoreau had for years experienced "a great deal of trouble." His walking companion (Channing, presumably) and himself had often compared notes about it, concluding after experiments that the duration of a shoe-tie might be made to serve as a reasonably

accurate unit of measure, as accurate, say, as a stadium or a league. Channing, indeed, would sometimes go without shoe-strings, rather than be plagued so incessantly by their dissolute behavior. Finally Thoreau, being then thirty-six years old, and always exceptionally clever with his hands, set his wits seriously at work upon knots, and by a stroke of good fortune (or a stroke of genius) hit upon one which answered his end; only to be told, on communicating his discovery to a third party, that he had all his life been tying "granny knots," never having learned, at school or elsewhere, the secret of a square one! It might be well, he concludes, if all children were "taught the accomplishment." Verily, as Hosea Biglow did not say, they did n't know everything down in Concord.

More refreshing still are entries describing hours of serene communion with nature, hours in which, as in an instance already cited, the Spirit of the Lord blessed him, and he forgot even to be good. These entries, likewise, are less numerous than could be wished, though perhaps as frequent as could fairly be expected; since ecstasies, like feasts, must in the nature of things be somewhat broadly spaced; and it is interesting, not to say surprising, to see how frankly he looks upon them afterward as subjects on which to try his pen. In these "seasons when our genius reigns we may be powerless for expression," he remarks; but in calmer hours, when talent is again active, "the memory of those rarer moods comes to color our picture, and is the permanent paint-pot, as it were, into which we dip our brush." But, in truth, the whole journal, some volumes of which are carefully indexed

in his own hand, is quite undisguisedly a collection of thoughts, feelings, and observations, out of which copy is to be extracted. In it, he says, "I wish to set down such choice experiences that my own writings may inspire me, and at last I may make wholes of parts. . . . Each thought that is welcomed and recorded is a nest-egg by the side of which more will be laid."

A born writer, he is "greedy of occasions to express" himself. He counts it "wise to write on many subjects, that so he may find the right and inspiring one." "There are innumerable avenues to a perception of the truth," he tells himself. "Improve the suggestion of each object, however humble, however slight and transient the provocation. What else is there to be improved?"

The literary diarist, like the husbandman, knows not which shall prosper. Morning and evening, he can only sow the seed. So it was with Thoreau. "A strange and unaccountable thing," he pronounces his journal. "It will allow nothing to be predicated of it; its good is not good, nor its bad bad. If I make a huge effort to expose my innermost and richest wares to light, my counter seems cluttered with the meanest homemade stuffs; but after months or years I may discover the wealth of India, and whatever rarity is brought overland from Cathay, in that confused heap, and what seemed a festoon of dried apple or pumpkin will prove a string of Brazilian diamonds, or pearls from Coromandel."

Well, we make sure that whoever tumbles the heap over now, more than forty years after the last object was laid upon it, will be rewarded with many and many a jewel. Here, for his encouragement, are half a dozen

out of the goodly number that one customer has lately turned up, in a hasty rummaging of the counter: —

“When a dog runs at you, whistle for him.”

“We must be at the helm at least once a day; we must feel the tiller rope in our hands, and know that if we sail, we steer.”

“In composition I miss the hue of the mind.”

“After the era of youth is past, the knowledge of ourselves is an alloy that spoils our satisfactions.”

“How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live.”

“Silence is of various depths and fertility, like soil.”

“Praise should be spoken as simply and naturally as a flower emits its fragrance.”

Here, again, is a mere nothing, a momentary impression caught, in ball-players’ language, on the fly; nothing like a pearl from Coromandel, if you will, but at the worst a toothsome bite out of a wild New England apple. It is winter. “I saw a team come out of a path in the woods,” says Thoreau, “as though it had never gone in, but belonged there, and only came out like Elisha’s bears.” There will be few country-bred Yankee boys, we imagine, who will not remember to have experienced something precisely like that, under precisely the same circumstances, though it never occurred to them to put the feeling into words, much less to preserve it in a drop of ink. That is one of the good things that a writer does for us. And our country-bred boy, if we mistake not, is likely to consider this one careless sentence of Thoreau, which adds not a cent’s worth to the sum of what is called human knowledge, as of

more value than any dozen pages of his painstaking botanical records.

Thoreau the naturalist appears in the journal, not as a master, but as a learner. It could hardly be otherwise, of course, a journal being what it is. There we see him conning by himself his daily lesson, correcting yesterday by to-day, and to-day by to-morrow, progressing, like every scholar, over the stepping-stones of his own mistakes. Of the branches he pursued, as far as the present writer can presume to judge, he was strongest in botany; certainly it was to plants that he most persistently devoted himself; but even there he had as many uncertainties as discoveries to set down; and he set them down with unflagging zeal and unrestrained particularity. The daily account is running over with question-marks. His patience was admirable; the more so as he worked entirely by himself, with few of the helps that in this better-furnished time almost belie the old proverb, and make even the beginner’s path a kind of royal road to learning. The day of “How-to-Know” handbooks had not yet dawned.

Of his bird-studies it would be interesting, if there were room, to speak at greater length. Here, even more than in botany, if that were possible, he suffered for lack of assistance, and even in his later entries leaves the present-day reader wondering how so eager a scholar could have spent so many years in learning so comparatively little. The mystery is partly cleared, however, when it is found that until 1854 — say for more than a dozen years — he studied without a glass. He does not buy things, he explains, with characteristic self-satisfac-

tion, till long after he begins to want them, so that when he does get them he is "prepared to make a perfect use of them." It was wasteful economy. He might as well have botanized without a pocket-lens.

But glass or no glass, how could an ornithological observer, whose power — so Emerson said — "seemed to indicate additional senses," be in the field daily for ten or fifteen years before setting eyes upon his first rose-breasted grosbeak? — which memorable event happened to Thoreau on the 13th of June, 1853! How could a man who had made it his business for at least a dozen years to "name all the birds without a gun," stand for a long time within a few feet of a large bird, so busy that it could not be scared far away, and then go home uncertain whether he had been looking at a woodcock or a snipe? How could he, when thirty-five years old, see a flock of sparrows, and hear them sing, and not be sure whether or not they were chipping sparrows? And how could a man so strong in times and seasons, always marking dates with an almanac's exactness, how could he, so late as '52, inquire concerning the downy woodpecker, one of the more familiar and constant of year-round birds, "Do we see him in the winter?" and again, a year later, be found asking whether he, the same downy woodpecker, is not the first of our woodland birds to arrive in the spring? At thirty-six he is amazed to the extent of double exclamation points by the sight of a flicker so early as March 29.

It fills one with astonishment to hear him (May 4, 1853) describing what he takes to be an indigo-bird after this fashion: "Dark throat and light beneath, and white

spot on wings," with hoarse, rapid notes, a kind of *twee, twee, twee*, not musical. The stranger may have been — most likely it was — a black-throated blue warbler; which is as much like an indigo-bird as a bluebird is like a blue jay, — or a yellow apple like an orange. And the indigo-bird, it should be said, is a common New-Englander, such as one of our modern schoolboy bird-gazers would have no difficulty in getting into his "list" any summer day in Concord; while the warbler in question, though nothing but a migrant, and somewhat seclusive in its habits, is so regular in its passage and so unmistakably marked (no bird more so), that it seems marvelous how Thoreau, prowling about everywhere with his eyes open, should year after year have missed it.

The truth appears to be that even of the commoner sorts of birds that breed in eastern Massachusetts or migrate through it, Thoreau — during the greater part of his life, at least — knew by sight and name only a small proportion, wonderful as his knowledge seemed to those who, like Emerson, knew practically nothing.¹

Not that the journal is likely to prove less interesting to bird-loving readers on this account. On the contrary, it may rather be more so, as showing them the means and methods of an ornithological amateur fifty years

¹ Under date of June 9, 1854, we find him writing: "I should like to know the birds of the woods better. What birds inhabit our woods? I hear their various notes ringing through them. What musicians compose our woodland quire? They must be forever strange and interesting to me." Even the glass that he finally bought was not an opera-glass, but a "spy-glass" (monocular) so called, and must have been of comparatively little help in the identification of woodland species.

ago, and, especially, as providing for them a desirable store of ornithological nuts to crack on winter evenings. Some such reader, by a careful collation of the data which the publication of the journal as a whole puts at his disposal, will perhaps succeed in settling the identity of the famous "night-warbler;" a bird which some, we believe, have suspected to be nothing rarer than the almost superabundant oven-bird, but which, so far as we ourselves know, may have been almost any one (or any two or three) of our smaller common birds that are given to occasional ecstatic song-flights.¹ Whatever it was, it was of use to Thoreau for the quickening of his imagination, and for literary purposes; and Emerson was well advised in warning him to beware of booking it, lest life henceforth should have so much the less to show him.

It must be said, however, that Thoreau stood in slight need of such a caution. He cherished for himself a pretty favorable opinion of a certain kind and measure of ignorance. With regard to some of his ornithological mysteries, for example, — the night-warbler, the seringo-bird (which with something like certainty we may conjecture to have been the savanna sparrow), and others, — he flatters himself that his good genius had withheld their names from him that he might the better learn their character, — whatever such an expression may be supposed to mean.

He maintained stoutly, from beginning to end, that

¹ Once he saw it (August 3, 1858), and then it proved to be a Maryland yellow-throat. At other times it was almost certainly an oven-bird.

he was not of the ordinary school of naturalists, but "a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher in one;" though he believed himself, in his own words, "by constitution as good an observer as most." He will not be one of those who seek facts as facts, studying nature as a dead language. He studies her for purposes of his own, in search of the "raw material of tropes and figures." "I pray for such experience as will make nature significant," he declares; and then, with the same penful of ink, he asks: "Is that the swamp gooseberry of Gray now just beginning to blossom at Saw-Mill Brook? It has a divided style and stamens, etc., as yet not longer than the calyx, though my slip has no thorns nor prickles," and so on, and so on. Pages on pages of the journal are choke-full, literally, of this kind of botanical interrogation, till the unsympathetic reader will be in danger of surmising that the mystical searcher after tropes and symbols is sometimes not so utterly unlike the student of the dead language of fact. But then, it is one of the virtues of a journal that it is not a work of art, that it has no form, no fashion (and so does not go *out* of fashion), and is always at liberty to contradict itself. As Thoreau said, he tumbled his goods upon the counter; no single customer is bound to be pleased with them all; different men, different tastes; let each select from the pile the things that suit his fancy.

For our own part, we acknowledge, — and the shrewd reader may already have remarked the fact, — we have not been disinclined to choose here and there a bit of some less rare and costly stuff. The man is so sternly virtuous, so inexorably in earnest, so heart-set upon per-

fection, that we almost like him best when for a moment he betrays something that suggests a touch of human frailty. We prick up our ears when he speaks of a woman he once in a while goes to see, who tells him to his face that she thinks him self-conceited. Now, then, we whisper to ourselves, how will this man who despises flattery, and, boasting himself a "commoner," professes that for him "there is something devilish in manners," — how will this candor-loving, truth-speaking, truth-appreciating man enjoy the rebuke of so unmannered a mentor? And we smile and say Aha! when he adds that the lady wonders why he does not visit her oftener.

We smile, too, when he brags, in early February, that he has not yet put on his winter clothing, amusing himself the while over the muffs and furs of his less hardy neighbors, his own "simple diet" making him so tough in the fibre that he "flourishes like a tree;" and then, a week later, writes with unbroken equanimity that he is down with bronchitis, contenting himself to spend his days cuddled in a warm corner by the stove.

Trifles of this kind encourage a pleasant feeling of brotherly relationship. He is one of us, after all, with like passions. But of course we really like him best when he is *at his best*, — as in some outpouring of his love for things natural and wild. Let us have one more such quotation: "Now I yearn for one of those old, meandering, dry, uninhabited roads, which lead away from towns, which lead us away from temptation, which conduct us to the outside of earth, over its uppermost crust; where you may forget in what country you are travelling; where your head is more in heaven than your feet are on

earth; where you can pace when your breast is full, and cherish your moodiness. . . . There I can walk and recover the lost child that I am without any ringing of a bell."

For real warmth, when once the fire burns, who can exceed our stoic?

We like, also, his bits of prettiness, things in which he is second to nobody, though prettiness, again, is not supposed to be the stoic's "note;" and they are all the prettier, as well as ten times more welcome, because he has the grace — and the sound literary sense — to drop them here and there, as it were casually, upon a ground of simple, unaffected prose. Here, now, is a sentence that by itself is worth a deal of ornithology: "The song sparrow is heard in fields and pastures, setting the midsummer day to music, — as if it were the music of a mossy rail or fence-post." Of dragon-flies he says: "How lavishly they are painted! How cheap was the paint! How free was the fancy of their Creator!" In early June, when woods are putting forth leaves, "the summer is pitching its tent." He finds the dainty fringed polygala (whose ordinary color is a lovely rosé-purple) sporting white blossoms, and remarks: "Thus many flowers have their nun sisters, dressed in white." Soaring hawks are "kites without strings;" and when he and his companion are travelling across country, keeping out of the sight of houses, yet compelled to traverse here and there a farmer's field, they "shut every window with an apple tree."

Gems like these one need not be a connoisseur to appreciate, and they are common upon his counter. It

was a good name that Channing gave him: "The Poet-Naturalist."

But there are better things than flowers and jewels to be found in Thoreau's stock. There are cordials and tonics there, to brace a man when he is weary; eye-washes, to cleanse his vision till he sees the heights above him and repents the lowness of his aims and the vulgarity of his satisfactions; blisters and irritant plasters in large variety and of warranted strength; but little or nothing, so far as the present customer has noticed, in the line of anodynes and sleeping-powders. There we may buy moral wisdom, which is not only the "foundation and source of good writing," as one of the ancients said, but of the arts in general, especially the art of life. If the world is too much with us, if wealth attracts and the "rust of copper" has begun to eat into the soul, if we are in danger of selling our years for things that perish with the using, here we may find correctives, and go away thankful, rejoicing henceforth to be rich in a better coinage than any that bears the world's stamp. The very exaggerations of the master — if we call them such — may do us good like a medicine; for there are diseased conditions which yield to nothing so quickly as to a shock.

As for Thoreau himself, life might have been smoother for him had he been less exacting in his idealism, more tolerant of imperfection in others and in himself; had he taken his studies, and even his spiritual aspirations, a grain or two less seriously. A bit of boyish play now and then, the bow quite unbent, or a dose of novel-reading of the love-making, humanizing (Trollopean) sort, could

one imagine it, with a more temperate cherishing of his moodiness, might have done him no harm. It would have been for his comfort, so much may confidently be said, whether for his happiness is another question, had he been one of those gentler humorists who can sometimes see themselves, as all humorists have the gift of seeing other people, funny side out. But then, had these things been so, had his natural scope been wider, his genius, so to say, more tropical, richer, freer, more expansive, more various and flexible, more like the spreading banyan and less like the soaring, sky-pointing spruce, — why, then he would no longer have been Thoreau; for better or worse, his speech would have lost its distinctive tang; and in the long run the world, which likes a touch of bitter and a touch of sour, would almost certainly have found the man himself less interesting, and his books less rememberable. And made as he was, "born to his own affairs," what else could he do but stick to himself? "We are constantly invited to be what we are," he said. The words might fittingly have been cut upon his gravestone.

B. T.