

V

DECEMBER, 1857

(ÆT. 40)

Dec. 1. P. M. — Walking in Ebby Hubbard's woods, I hear a red squirrel barking at me amid the pine and oak tops, and now I see him coursing from tree to tree. How securely he travels there, fifty feet from the ground, leaping from the slender, bending twig of one tree across an interval of three or four feet and catching at the nearest twig of the next, which so bends under him that it is at first hard to get up it. His travelling a succession of leaps in the air at that height without wings! And yet he gets along about as rapidly as on the ground.

I hear the faintest possible quivet from a nuthatch, quite near me on a pine. I thus always begin to hear this bird on the approach of winter,¹ as if it did not breed here, but wintered here.

I hear of two more flocks of geese going over to-day.

Dec. 2. Measuring Little Goose Pond, I observed two painted tortoises moving about under the thin transparent ice. When I broke it with my fist over each in succession, it was stunned by the blow. I put them back through the hole; else they might have frozen outside. There was a brown leech spread broad

¹ Hear it all the fall (and occasionally through the summer of '59).

and flat and roundish on the sternum of one, nearly an inch and a half across, apparently going to winter with it.

Where are the respectabilities of sixty years ago, the village aristocracy, the Duncan Ingrahams who lived in the high house? An Englishman lived in the Vose house. How poor and short-lived a distinction to strive after!

I find that, according to the deed of Duncan Ingraham to John Richardson in 1797, my old bean-field on Walden Pond then belonged to George Minott. (Minott thinks he bought it of an Allen.) This was Deacon George Minott, who lived in the house next below the East Quarter schoolhouse, and was a brother of my grandfather-in-law. He was directly descended from Thomas Minott, who, according to Shattuck, was secretary of the Abbot of Walden (!) in Essex, and whose son George was born at Saffron Walden (!) and afterwards was one of the early settlers of Dorchester.

Roads were once described as leading to a meeting-house, but not so often nowadays.

Dec. 3. Thursday. Surveying the Richardson lot, which bounds on Walden Pond, I turned up a rock near the pond to make a bound with, and found under it, attached to it, a collection of black ants (say a quarter of an inch long) an inch in diameter, collected around one monster black ant as big as four or five at least, and a small parcel of yellowish eggs (?). The large ant had no wings and was probably their queen. The ants were quite lively, though but little way under the

edge of the rock. The eggs (?) adhered to the rock when turned up.

Dec. 4. Surveying the Richardson Fair Haven lot. Rufus Morse, who comes to find his bounds on R., accounts for his deed being tattered by saying that some tame flying squirrels got loose and into a chest where he kept his papers and nibbled them, though the lid was not raised enough to get in a cent! They are so flat. I survey to a white oak called in '91 "a small white oak."

Dec. 5. At noon a few flakes fall.

Dec. 6. Sunday. Flannery tells me he is cutting in Holbrook's Swamp, in the Great Meadows, a lonely place. He sees a fox repeatedly there, and also a white weasel, — once with a mouse in its mouth, in the swamp.

Dec. 7. Running the long northwest side of Richardson's Fair Haven lot.

It is a fair, sunny, and warm day in the woods for the season. We eat our dinners on the middle of the line, amid the young oaks in a sheltered and very unfrequented place. I cut some leafy shrub oaks and cast them down for a dry and springy seat. As I sit there amid the sweet-fern, talking with my man Briney, I observe that the recent shoots of the sweet-fern — which, like many larger bushes and trees, have a few leaves in a tuft still at their extremities — toward the sun are densely covered with a bright, warm, silvery down,

which looks like frost, so thick and white. Looking the other way, I see none of it, but the bare reddish twigs. Even this is a cheering and compensating discovery in my otherwise barren work. I get thus a few positive values, answering to the bread and cheese which make my dinner. I owe thus to my weeks at surveying a few such slight but positive discoveries.

Briney, who has been in this country but few years, says he has lost three children here. His eldest boy fell on the deck in rough weather and struck his knee on the anchor-chain, and though he did not mind it then, his whole body ran out of the wound within two or three months.

I would rather sit at this table with the sweet-fern twigs between me and the sun than at the king's.

Dec. 8. Staples says he came to Concord some twenty-four years ago a poor boy with a dollar and three cents in his pocket, and he spent the three cents for drink at Bigelow's tavern, and now he's worth "twenty hundred dollars clear." He remembers many who inherited wealth whom he can buy out to-day. I told him that he had done better than I in a pecuniary respect, for I had only earned my living. "Well," said he, "that's all I've done, and I don't know as I've got much better clothes than you." I was particularly poorly clad then, in the woods; my hat, pants, boots, rubbers, and gloves would not have brought fourpence, and I told the Irishman that it was n't everybody could afford to have a fringe round his legs, as I had, my corduroys not preserving a selvage.

Staples said there was one thing he liked. "What is that?" "An honest man." If he lent a man money, and when it became due he came and asked for more time because he could not pay, he excused him, but if, after it had become due, he went to the man, and he then made the same excuse, he lost all confidence in him.

Dec. 13. P. M. — To Goose Pond.

This and the like ponds are just covered with virgin ice just thick enough to bear, though it cracks about the edges on the sunny sides. You may call it virgin ice as long as it is transparent. I see the water-target leaves frozen in under the ice in Little Goose Pond. I see those same two tortoises (of Dec. 2d), moving about in the same place under the ice, which I cannot crack with my feet. The Emerson children see six under the ice of Goose Pond to-day. Apparently many winter in the mud of these ponds and pond-holes.

In sickness and barrenness it is encouraging to believe that our life is dammed and is coming to a head, so that there seems to be no loss, for what is lost in time is gained in power. All at once, unaccountably, as we are walking in the woods or sitting in our chamber, after a worthless fortnight, we cease to feel mean and barren.

I go this afternoon thinking I may find the stakes set for auction lots on the Ministerial Lot in December, '51. I find one white birch standing and two fallen. The latter were faced at one end, for the numbers, and at the other *rotten* and broken off as short, appar-

ently, as if sawed, because the bark so tears. At first I did not know but they had been moved, but thinking that if they had fallen where they stood I should find some hole or looseness in the ground at the rotten end, I felt for it and in each case found it; in one, also, the rotten point of the stake. Thus in six years two out of three stout (two-and-a-half-inch) birch stakes were flat. The hickory stake I set on R. W. E.'s town line in March, '50, was flat this last summer, or seven years, but a white [*sic*] stake set in '49-'50 on Moore and Hosmer's lot was standing aslant this month. A surveyor should know what stakes last longest.

I hear a characteristic anecdote respecting Mrs. Hoar, from good authority. Her son Edward, who takes his father's place and attends to the same duties, asked his mother the other night, when about retiring, "Shall I put the cat down cellar?" "No," said she, "you may put her outdoors." The next night he asked, "Shall I put the cat outdoors?" "No," answered she, "you may put her down cellar." The third night he asked, "Shall I put the cat down cellar or outdoors?" "Well," said his mother, "you may open the cellar door and then open the front door, and let her go just which way she pleases." Edward suggested that it was a cold night for the cat to be outdoors, but his mother said, "Who knows but she has a little kitten somewhere to look after?" Mrs. H. is a peculiar woman, who has her own opinion and way, a strong-willed, managing woman.

Dec. 15. Within a day or two, I saw another partridge in the snare of November 28th, frozen stiff.

To-day I see that some creature has torn and disembowelled it, removing it half a rod, leaving the head in snare, which has lifted it three or four feet in the air on account of its lightness. This last bird was either a female or young male, its ruff and bar on tail being rather dark-brown than black.

Dec. 16. Begins to snow about 8 A. M., and in fifteen minutes the ground is white, but it soon stops. Plowed grounds show white first.

Dec. 20. A. M. — To Easterbrooks Country with Ricketson.

A hen-hawk circling over that wild region. See its red tail.

The cellar stairs at the old Hunt house are made of square oak timbers; also the stairs to the chamber of the back part of apparently square maple (?) timber, much worn. The generous cellar stairs!

Dec. 21. Walking over the Andromeda Ponds between Walden and Fair Haven, which have only frozen just enough to bear me, I see in springy parts, where the ice is thin, good-sized pollywogs wiggling away, scared by the sound of my steps and cracking of the ice. They appear to keep in motion in such muddy pond-holes, where a spring wells up from the bottom till midwinter, if not all winter.

Dec. 25. Surveying for heirs of J. Richardson, G. Heywood and A. Brooks accompanying.

Skate on Goose Pond. Heywood says that some who have gone into Ebby Hubbard's barn to find him have seen the rats run over his shoulders, they are so familiar with him. This because I stopped to speak with Hubbard in his barn about bounds. I find the true line between Richardson and Mrs. Bigelow, which Captain Hubbard overlooked in 1840, and yet I find it by his own plan of 1827. Bigelow had set a split stone far into Richardson. After making the proper allowance for variation since 1827, I set my stake exactly on an old spotted line, which was overlooked in 1840 and is probably as old as the survey of '27, or thirty years. It is on good-sized white pines, and is quite distinct now, though not blazed into the wood at first. It would not be detected unless you were looking for it.

Dec. 26. Snows all day, — first snow of any consequence, three or four inches in all.

Humphrey Buttrick tells me that he has shot little dippers. He also saw the bird which Melvin shot last summer (a coot), but he never saw one of them before. The little dipper must, therefore, be different from a coot. Is it not a grebe?

Dec. 27. Sunday. A clear, pleasant day.

P. M. — To Goose Pond.

Tree sparrows about the weeds in the yard. A snowball on every pine plume, for there has been no wind to shake it down. The pitch pines look like trees heavily laden with snow oranges. The snowballs on their plumes are like a white fruit. When I thought-

lessly strike at a limb with my hatchet, in my surveying, down comes a sudden shower of snow, whitening my coat and getting into my neck. You must be careful how you approach and jar the trees thus supporting a light snow.

Partridges dash away through the pines, jarring down the snow.

Mice have been abroad in the night. We are almost ready to believe that they have been shut up in the earth all the rest of the year because we have not seen their tracks. I see where, by the shore of Goose Pond, one has pushed up just far enough to open a window through the snow three quarters of an inch across, but has not been forth. Elsewhere, when on the pond,

I see in several places where one has made a circuit out on to the pond a rod or more, returning to the shore again. Such a track may, by what we call accident, be preserved for a geological period, or be obliterated by the melting of the snow.

Goose Pond is not thickly frozen yet. Near the north shore it cracks under the snow as I walk, and in many places water has oozed out and spread over the ice, mixing with the snow and making dark places. Walden is almost entirely skimmed over. It will probably be completely frozen over to-night.¹

I frequently hear a dog bark at some distance in the night, which, strange as it may seem, reminds me of the cooing or *crowing* of a ring dove which I heard every night a year ago at Perth Amboy. It was sure

¹ Yes.

to coo on the slightest noise in the house; as good as a watch-dog. The crowing of cocks, too, reminds me of it, and, now I think of it, it was precisely the intonation and accent of the cat owl's *hoo' hoo-hoo-oo*, dwelling in each case sonorously on the last syllable. They get the pitch and break ground with the first note, and then prolong and swell it in the last. The commonest and cheapest sounds, as the barking of a dog, produce the same effect on fresh and healthy ears that the rarest music does. It depends on your appetite for sound. Just as a crust is sweeter to a healthy appetite than confectionery to a pampered or diseased one. It is better that these cheap sounds be music to us than that we have the rarest ears for music in any other sense. I have lain awake at night many a time to think of the barking of a dog which I had heard long before, bathing my being again in those waves of sound, as a frequenter of the opera might lie awake remembering the music he had heard.

As my mother made my pockets once of Father's old fire-bags, with the date of the formation of the Fire Society on them, — 1794, — though they made but rotten pockets, — so we put our meaning into those old mythologies. I am sure that the Greeks were commonly innocent of any such *double-entendre* as we attribute to them.

One while we do not wonder that so many commit suicide, life is so barren and worthless; we only live on by an effort of the will. Suddenly our condition is ameliorated, and even the barking of a dog is a pleasure to us. So closely is our happiness bound up with our physical condition, and one reacts on the other.

Do not despair of life. You have no doubt force enough to overcome your obstacles. Think of the fox prowling through wood and field in a winter night for something to satisfy his hunger. Notwithstanding cold and the hounds and traps, his race survives. I do not believe any of them ever committed suicide. I saw this afternoon where probably a fox had rolled some small carcass in the snow.

I cut a blueberry bush this afternoon, a venerable-looking one bending over Goose Pond, with a gray, flat, scaly bark, the bark split into long, narrow, closely adhering scales, the inner bark dull-reddish. At several feet from the ground it was one and five sixteenths inches in diameter, and I counted about twenty-nine indistinct rings. It seems a very close-grained wood. It appears, then, that some of those old gray blueberry bushes which overhang the pond-holes have attained half the age of man.

I am disappointed by most essays and lectures. I find that I had expected the authors would have some life, some very private experience, to report, which would make it comparatively unimportant in what style they expressed themselves, but commonly they have only a talent to exhibit. The new magazine which all have been expecting may contain only another love story as naturally told as the last, perchance, but without the slightest novelty in it. It may be a mere vehicle for Yankee phrases.

What interesting contrasts our climate affords! In July you rush panting into [a] pond, to cool yourself in the tepid water, when the stones on the bank are

so heated that you cannot hold one tightly in your hand, and horses are melting on the road. Now you walk on the same pond frozen, amid the snow, with numbed fingers and feet, and see the water-target bleached and stiff in the ice.

Dec. 31. P. M. — Surveying Goose Pond.

After some rain yesterday and in the night, there was a little more snow, and the ground is still covered. I am surprised to find Walden still closed since Sunday night, notwithstanding the warm weather since it skimmed over, and that Goose Pond bears, though covered with slush; but ice under water is slow to thaw. It does not break up so soon as you would expect. Walking over it, I thought that I saw an old glove on the ice or slush, but, approaching, found it to be a bullfrog, flat on its belly with its legs stretched out. Touching it, I found it to be alive, though it could only partially open its eyes, and it hung motionless and flimsy like a rag in my hands. It was evidently nearly chilled to death and could not jump, though there was then no freezing. I looked round a good while and finally found a hole to put it into, squeezing it through. Perhaps in such a warm rain the surface water becomes warmer than at the bottom, and so tempts the frogs up on to the ice through a hole. This one was wholly unscathed by any animal, but would surely have frozen stiff in the night.

It is remarkable that in ordinary winter weather you will commonly find some of these small holes called air or breathing holes, in most ponds. But of whatever

service they may be to the inhabitants of the water, they are not commonly formed by any undulation or upwelling from below, but as far as I have observed, by surface water flowing in through a crevice and wearing away the ice.

Warm as it is, underneath all this slosh the ice seems as solid as ever.

Under and attached to one of the lowermost branches of a white pine sapling in my old potato-field, I see a large hornet's nest, *close to the ground*.

I have been surveying most of the time for a month past and have associated with various characters:—

First there was Staples, quick, clear, downright, and on the whole a good fellow, especially good to treat with rougher and slower men than himself, always meaning well.

An Irishman, rather slow and dull but well-meaning.

A rustic innkeeper, evidently rather close-fisted.

George Heywood, a quiet, efficient man, very gentlemanly and agreeable to deal with; no pretense nor bluster, but simple, direct, and even sweet.

— —, a crooked stick, not readily apprehending your drift, referring to old deeds or places which he can't find, thinking he is entitled to many more acres than belong to him, but never leaving his work or his cattle to attend to you. To be found commonly in his barn, if you come upon him suddenly before he can hide. Has some complaint or injury which deforms him somewhat, — has crooked his body, so that when you meet him in the street he looks as if he was going across the road.

Another Irishman, one of the worst of his race, full of blarney, one of the would-be gentlemen, who, when treated according to his deserts, having complained unreasonably of my price, apologizes by saying that he meant nothing. "What's the use of having a tongue in your head if you don't use it?"

A common specimen of the Yankee, who commonly answers me with "exactly" or "just so."

— —, who was so afraid he should lose some land belonging to him that, though he had employed Rice to survey his small wood-lot of three acres, within a year, he working two or three days at it and setting at least fifty stakes about it, having also two plans of it, yet, seeing that I had by chance set a stake a foot or two one side of his line, thought there was some mistake and would have me measure his lot anew. It was but little labor, the lines were so open, — for a path was actually worn round the whole lot. He appears to go round it every day or two. When I wanted a straight pole, he was very scrupulous not to cut it from his neighbor's side of the line. He did not seem able to understand a plan or deed, and had sold some of his land because he did not know that he had a good title to it. Everything I told him about his deed and plan seemed to surprise him infinitely and make him laugh with excess of interest. When I pointed out anything in the plan, he did not look at it, only at my finger and at me, and took my word for it. I told him that I wondered his last surveyor had not set a stake and stone in one place, according to his plan and deed, a perfectly plain case, the stump of the pitch pine re-

ferred to being left. He said he did n't want to make bounds, and asked me if I should have set it there, to which I answered, "Yes, of course," that was what I had been doing all my life, making bounds, or rather finding them, remaking what had been unmade, where they were away. He listened to me as if I were an oracle. He did not in the least understand my instrument, or "spy-glass," as he called it, but had full faith that it knew the way straight through the thickest wood to missing bounds. He was so deaf I had to shout to him, and there were two more in his house deafer than he, — and I think only one other. The passers-by commonly hear them talking to one another within. I could never communicate with him when setting a stake or carrying the chain but by signs, and must first get his attention to the signs. This I accomplished, when he had hold of the chain, by giving it several smart jerks. When he paid me at his house, I observed that all his money was in silver. He said he told H—— that we had been cutting off some of his land, and H—— said, "Is that right?" H—— has a good deal of large old wood which he will not cut. — says that he goes into it with his axe, and striking on an old tree says, "That's sound," and so lets it stand, though when cut it turns out to be false-hearted.

— says that Rice worked two days on only two sides of his lot, but that he told him he would not charge him but two dollars if it took him a week. I found and used one of Rice's poles, left on the ground all planed for the purpose, for he worked not without tools.