

II

DECEMBER, 1850

(ÆT. 33)

Dec. 1. It is quite mild and pleasant to-day. I saw a little green hemisphere of moss which looked as if it covered a stone, but, thrusting my cane into it, I found it was nothing but moss, about fifteen inches in diameter and eight or nine inches high. When I broke it up, it appeared as if the annual growth was marked by successive layers half an inch deep each. The lower ones were quite rotten, but the present year's quite green, the intermediate white. I counted fifteen or eighteen. It was quite solid, and I saw that it continued solid as it grew by branching occasionally, just enough to fill the newly gained space, and the tender extremities of each plant, crowded close together, made the firm and compact surface of the bed. There was a darker line separating the growths, where I thought the surface had been exposed to the winter. It was quite saturated with water, though firm and solid.

Dec. 2. The woodpeckers' holes in the apple trees are about a fifth of an inch deep or just through the bark and half an inch apart. They must be the decaying trees that are most frequented by them, and probably their work serves to relieve and ventilate the tree and, as well, to destroy its enemies.

The barberries are shrivelled and dried. I find yet cranberries hard and not touched by the frost.

Dec. 4. Wednesday. Fair Haven Pond is now open, and there is no snow. It is a beautiful, almost Indian-summer, afternoon, though the air is more pure and glassy. The shrub oak fire burns briskly as seen from the Cliffs. The evergreens are greener than ever. I notice the row of dwarf willows advanced into the water in Fair Haven, three or four rods from the dry land, just at the lowest water-mark. You can get no disease but cold in such an atmosphere.

Though the sun is now an hour high, there is a peculiar bright light on the pines and on their stems. The lichens on their bark reflect it. In the horizon I see a succession of the brows of hills, bare or covered with wood, — look over the eyebrows of the recumbent earth. These are separated by long valleys filled with vapory haze.

If there is a little more warmth than usual at this season, then the beautiful air which belongs to winter is perceived and appreciated.

Dec. 6. Being at Newburyport this evening, Dr. (H. C.?) Perkins showed me the circulations in the nitella, which is slightly different from the chara, under a microscope. I saw plainly the circulation, looking like bubbles going round in each joint, up one side and down the other of a sort of white line, and sometimes a dark-colored mote appeared to be carried along with them. He said that the circulation could be well seen in the common celandine, and moreover that when a shade

was cast on it by a knife-blade the circulation was reversed. Ether would stop it, or the death of the plant.

He showed me a green clamshell, — *Anodon fluvialilis*, — which he said was a *female* with young, found in a pond near by.

Also the head of a Chinook or Flathead.

Also the humerus of a mylodon (of Owen) from Oregon. Some more remains have been found in Missouri, and a whole skeleton in Buenos Ayres. A digging animal.

He could not catch his frogs asleep.

Dec. 8. It snowed in the night of the 6th, and the ground is now covered, — our first snow, two inches deep. A week ago I saw cows being driven home from pasture. Now they are kept at home. Here's an end to their grazing. The farmer improves this first slight snow to accomplish some pressing jobs, — to move some particular rocks on a drag, or the like. I perceive how quickly he has seized the opportunity. I see no tracks now of cows or men or boys beyond the edge of the wood. Suddenly they are shut up. The remote pastures and hills beyond the woods are now closed to cows and cowherds, aye, and to cowards. I am struck by this sudden solitude and remoteness which these places have acquired. The dear privacy and retirement and solitude which winter makes possible! carpeting the earth with snow, furnishing more than woolen feet to all walkers, cronching the snow only. From Fair Haven I see the hills and fields, aye, and the icy woods in the corner

shine, gleam with the dear old wintry sheen. Those are not surely the cottages I have seen all summer. They are some cottages which I have in my mind.

Now Fair Haven Pond is open and ground is covered with snow and ice; a week or two ago the pond was frozen and the ground was still bare.

Still those particular red oak leaves which I had noticed are quite unwilted under the cliffs, and the apple leaves, though standing in snow and ice and incrustated with the latter, still ripe red, and *tender* fresh green leaves.

It is interesting to observe the manner in which the plants bear their snowy burden. The dry calyx leaves, like an oblong cup, of the *Trichostema dichotomum* have caught the rain or melting snow, and so this little butter-boat is filled with a frozen pure drop which stands up high above the sides of the cup, — so many pearly drops covering the whole plant, — in the wood-paths. The pennyroyal there also retains its fragrance under the ice and snow.

I find that the indigo-weed, whose *shade* still stands and holds its black seed-vessels, is not too humble to escape enemies. Almost every seed-vessel, which contains half a dozen seeds or more, contains also a little black six-legged bug about as big as a bug [*sic*], which gnaws the seeds; and sometimes I find a grub, though it is now cold weather and the plant is covered with ice. Not only our peas and grain have their weevils, but the fruit of the indigo-weed!

This evening for the first time the new moon is reflected from the frozen snow-crust.

Dec. 13. The river froze over last night, — skimmed over.

Dec. 16. Walden is open still. The river is probably open again.

There are wild men living along the shores of the Frozen Ocean. Who shall say that there is not as great an interval between the civilized man and the savage as between the savage and the brute? The undiscovered polar regions are the home of men.

I am struck with the difference between my feet and my hands. My feet are much nearer to foreign or inanimate matter or nature than my hands; they are more brute, they are more like the earth they tread on, they are more clod-like and lumpish, and I scarcely animate them.

Last Sunday, or the 14th, I walked on Loring's Pond to three or four islands there which I had never visited, not having a boat in the summer. On one containing an acre or two, I found a low, branching shrub frozen into the edge of the ice, with a fine spicy scent somewhat like sweet-fern and a handsome imbricate bud. When I rubbed the dry-looking fruit in my hands, it felt greasy and stained them a permanent yellow, which I could not wash out; it lasted several days, and my fingers smelled medicinal. I conclude that it is sweet-gale, and we named the island Myrica Island.

On those unfrequented islands, too, I noticed the red osier or willow, that common hard-berried plant with small red buds,¹ apparently two kinds of swamp-pink buds, some yellow, some reddish, a brittle, rough yellow-

¹ Panicked andromeda.

ish bush with handsome pinkish shoots; in one place in the meadow the greatest quantity of wild rose hips of various forms that I ever saw, now slightly withered; they were as thick as winterberries.

I noticed a bush covered with cocoons which were artfully concealed by two leaves wrapped round them, one still hanging by its stem, so that they looked like a few withered leaves left dangling. The worm, having first encased itself in another leaf for greater protection, folded more loosely around itself one of the leaves of the plant, taking care, however, to encase the leaf-stalk and the twig with a thick and strong web of silk, so far from depending on the strength of the stalk, which is now quite brittle. The strongest fingers cannot break it, and the cocoon can only be got off by slipping it up and off the twig. There they hang themselves secure for the winter, proof against cold and the birds, ready to become butterflies when new leaves push forth.¹

The snow everywhere was covered with snow-fleas like pepper. When you hold a mass in your hand, they skip and are gone before you know it. They are so small that they go through and through the new snow. Sometimes when collected they look like some powder which the hunter has spilled in the path.

Dec. 17. Flint's Pond apparently froze completely over last night. It is about two inches thick. Walden is only slightly skimmed over a rod from the shore. I noticed, where it had been frozen for some time near the shore of Flint's Pond and the ice was thicker and

¹ [Evidently cocoons of the Promethea moth.]

whiter, there were handsome spider-shaped dark places, where the under ice had melted, and the water had worn it running through, — a handsome figure on the icy carpet.

I noticed when the snow first came that the days were very sensibly lengthened by the light being reflected from the snow. Any work which required light could be pursued about half an hour longer. So that we may well pray that the ground may not be laid bare by a thaw in these short winter days.

Dec. 19. Yesterday I tracked a partridge in the new-fallen snow, till I came to where she took to flight, and I could track her no further. I see where the snowbirds have picked the seeds of the Roman wormwood and other weeds and have covered the snow with the shells and husks. The smilax berries are as plump as ever. The catkins of the alders are as tender and fresh-looking as ripe mulberries. The dried choke-cherries so abundant in the swamp are now quite sweet. The witch-hazel is covered with fruit and drops over gracefully like a willow, the yellow foundation of its flowers still remaining. I find the sweet-gale (*Myrica*) by the river also. The wild apples are frozen as hard as stones, and rattle in my pockets, but I find that they soon thaw when I get to my chamber and yield a sweet cider.¹ I am astonished that the animals make no more use of them.

Dec. 22. The apples are now thawed. This is their first thawing. Those which a month ago were sour,

¹ [*Excursions*, p. 320; Riv. 393.]

crabbed, and uneatable are now filled with a rich, sweet cider which I am better acquainted with than with wine. And others, which have more substance, are a sweet and luscious food, — in my opinion of more worth than the pineapples which are imported from the torrid zone. Those which a month ago I tasted and repented of it, which the farmer willingly left on the tree, I am now glad to find have the property of hanging on like the leaves of the shrub oak. It is a way to keep cider sweet without boiling. Let the frost come to freeze them first solid as stones, and then the sun or a warm winter day — for it takes but little heat — to thaw them, and they will seem to have borrowed a flavor from heaven through the medium of the air in which they hang. I find when I get home that they have thawed in my pocket and the ice is turned to cider. But I suspect that after the second freezing and thawing they will not be so good. I bend to drink the cup and save my lappets. What are the half-ripe fruits of the torrid south, to this fruit matured by the cold of the frigid north. There are those crabbed apples with which I cheated my companion, and kept a smooth face to tempt him to eat. Now we both greedily fill our pockets with them, and grow more social with their wine. Was there one that hung so high and sheltered by the tangled branches that our sticks could not dislodge it? It is a fruit never brought to market that I am aware of, — quite distinct from the apple of the markets, as from dried apple and cider. It is not every winter that produces it in perfection.¹

In winter I can explore the swamps and ponds. It is

¹ [*Excursions*, pp. 319, 320; Riv. 392-394.]

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a dark-aired winter day, yet I see the summer plants still peering above the snow. There are but few tracks in all this snow. It is the Yellow Knife River or the Saskatchewan. The large leafy lichens on the white pines, especially on the outside of the wood, look almost a golden yellow in the light reflected from the snow, while deeper in the wood they are ash-colored. In the swamps the dry, yellowish-colored fruit of the poison dogwood hangs like jewelry on long, drooping stems. It is pleasant to meet it, it has so much character relatively to man. Here is a stump on which a squirrel has sat and stripped the pine cones of a neighboring tree. Their cores and scales lie all around. He knew that they contained an almond¹ before the naturalist did. He has long been a close observer of Nature; opens her caskets. I see more tracks in the swamps than elsewhere.

Dec. 23. Here is an old-fashioned snow-storm. There is not much passing on railroads. The engineer says it is three feet deep above. Walden is frozen, one third of it, though I thought it was all frozen as I stood on the shore on one side only. There is no track on the Walden road. A traveller might cross it in the woods and not be sure it was a road. As I pass the farmers' houses I observe the cop [*sic*] of the sled propped up with a stick to prevent its freezing into the snow. The needles of the pines are drooping like cockerels' feathers after a rain, and frozen together by the sleety snow. The pitch pines now bear their snowy fruit.

¹ [See *Journal*, vol. i, p. 338.]

I can discern a faint foot or sled path sooner when the ground is covered with snow than when it is bare. The depression caused by the feet or the wheels is more obvious; perhaps the light and shade betray it, but I think it is mainly because the grass and weeds rise above it on each side and leave it blank, and a blank space of snow contrasts more strongly with the woods or grass than bare or beaten ground.

Even the surface of the snow is wont to be in waves like billows of the ocean.

Dec. 24. In walking across the Great Meadows to-day on the snow-crust, I noticed that the fine, dry snow which was blown over the surface of the frozen field, when I [looked] westward over it or toward the sun, looked precisely like steam curling up from its surface, as sometimes from a wet roof when the sun comes out after a rain.

The snow catches only in the hollows and against the reeds and grass, and never rests there, but when it has formed a broad and shallow drift or a long and narrow one like a winrow on the ice, it blows away again from one extremity, and leaves often a thin, tongue-like projection at one end, some inches above the firm crust.

I observe that there are many dead pine-needles sprinkled over the snow, which had not fallen before.

Saw a shrike pecking to pieces a small bird, apparently a snowbird. At length he took him up in his bill, almost half as big as himself, and flew slowly off with his prey dangling from his beak. I find that I had not

associated such actions with my idea of birds. It was not birdlike.

It is never so cold but it melts somewhere. Our mason well remarked that he had sometimes known it to be melting and freezing at the same time on a particular side of a house; while it was melting on the roof the icicles [were] forming under the eaves. It is always melting and freezing at the same time when icicles are formed.

Our thoughts are with those among the dead into whose sphere we are rising, or who are now rising into our own. Others we inevitably forget, though they be brothers and sisters. Thus the departed may be nearer to us than when they were present. At death our friends and relations either draw nearer to us and are found out, or depart further from us and are forgotten. Friends are as often brought nearer together as separated by death.

Dec. 26. Thursday. The pine woods seen from the hilltops, now that the ground is covered with snow, are not green but a dark brown, greenish-brown perhaps. You see dark patches of wood. There are still half a dozen fresh ripe red and glossy oak leaves left on the bush under the Cliffs.

Walden not yet more than half frozen over.

Dec. 30. In R. Gordon Cumming's "Hunter's Life in South Africa,"¹ I find an account of the honey-bird,

¹ [*Five Years of a Hunter's Life in the Far Interior of South Africa*, 1850.]

which will lead a person to a wild bees' nest and, having got its share of the spoil, will sometimes lead to a second and third. (Vol. I, page 49.)

He saw dry sheep's dung burning, and after eighteen months it was burning still. One heap was said to have burned seven years. Remarkable for burning slowly. (Page 62.)

He came across a Boer who manufactured ashes by burning a particular bush and sold it to the richer Boers. (Page 71.)

He says that the oryx or gemsbok, a kind of antelope, never tastes water. Lives on the deserts. (Page 94.)

The Bushmen conceal water in ostrich eggs at regular intervals across the desert, and so perform long journeys over them safely. (Page 101.)

The hatching of ostrich eggs not left to heat of sun. (Page 105.) The natives empty them by a small aperture at one end, fill with water, and cork up the hole with grass. (Page 106.)

The Hottentots devoured the marrow of a koodoo raw as a matter of course.¹

The Bechuanas use "the assagai," "a sort of light spear or javelin" with a shaft six feet long, which they will send through a man's body at a hundred yards. (Page 201.)

The Bakatlas smelt and work in iron quite well; make spears, battle-axes, knives, needles, etc., etc. (Page 207.)

The skin of the eland just killed, like that of most

¹ [*Excursions*, p. 225; Riv. 275, 276.]

other antelopes, emits the most delicious perfume of trees and grass. (Page 218.)¹

When waiting by night for elephants to approach a fountain, he "heard a low rumbling noise . . . , caused (as the Bechuanas affirmed) by the bowels of the elephants which were approaching the fountain." (Page 261.)

"A child can put a hundred of them [elephants]² to flight by passing at a quarter of a mile to windward." (Page 263.)

It is incredible how many "goodly" trees an elephant will destroy, sometimes wantonly. (265.)

An elephant's friend will protect its wounded companion at the risk of its own life. (268.)

The rhinoceros-birds stick their bills in the ear of the rhinoceros and wake him up when the hunter is approaching. They live on ticks and other parasitic insects on his body. He perfectly understands their warning. He has chased a rhinoceros many miles on horseback and fired many shots before he fell, and all the while the birds remained by him, perched on his back and sides, and as each bullet struck him they ascended about six feet into the air, uttering a cry of alarm, and then resumed their position. Sometimes they were swept off his back by branches of trees. When the rhinoceros was shot at midnight, they have remained by his body thinking him asleep, and on the hunter's approaching in the morning have tried to wake him up. (Page 293.)

¹ [*Excursions*, p. 225; Riv. 276.]

² [Thoreau supplies the word.]

The Bechuanas make a pipe in a few moments by kneading moistened earth with their knuckles on a twig, until a hole is established, then one end of the aperture is enlarged with their fingers for a bowl. (Page 306.)

Dec. 31. I observe that in the cut by Walden Pond the sand and stones fall from the overhanging bank and rest on the snow below; and thus, perchance, the stratum deposited by the side of the road in the winter can permanently be distinguished from the summer one by some faint seam, to be referred to the peculiar conditions under which it was deposited.

The pond has been frozen over since I was there last.

Certain meadows, as Heywood's, contain warmer water than others and are slow to freeze. I do not remember to have crossed this with impunity in all places. The brook that issues from it is still open completely, though the thermometer was down to eight below zero this morning.

The blue jays evidently notify each other of the presence of an intruder, and will sometimes make a great chattering about it, and so communicate the alarm to other birds and to beasts.