

VIII

DECEMBER, 1852

(ÆT. 35)

Dec. 1. To Cliffs.

The snow keeps off unusually. The landscape is the color of a russet apple which has no golden cheek. The sunset sky supplies that. But though it be crude to bite, it yields a pleasant acid flavor. The year looks back toward summer, and a summer smile is reflected in her face. There is in these days a coolness in the air which makes me hesitate to call them Indian summer. At this season I observe the form of the buds which are prepared for spring, — the large bright yellowish and reddish buds of the swamp-pink, the already downy ones of the *Populus tremuloides* and the willows, the red ones of the blueberry, etc., the long, sharp ones of the amelanchier, the spear-shaped ones of the viburnum, etc.; also the catkins of the alders and birches.

Dec. 2. The pleasantest day of all.

Started in boat before 9 A. M. down river to Billerica with W. E. C.

Not wind enough for a sail. I do not remember when I have taken a sail or a row on the river in December before. We had to break the ice about the boat-house for some distance. Still no snow. The banks

are white with frost. The air is calm, and the water smooth. The distant sounds of cars, cocks, hounds, etc., as we glide past N. Barrett's farm, remind me of spring. It is an anticipation, a looking through winter to spring. There is a certain resonance and elasticity in the air that makes the least sound melodious as in spring. The old unpainted houses under their trees (Joel Barrett's?) look as if winter had come and gone. There is one side of Abner (?) Buttrick's, painted as if with the pumpkin pies left over after Thanksgiving, it is so singular a yellow. The river has risen since the last rain a few feet, and partially floods the meadow. See still two ducks on the meadow. Hear the jay in distant copses, and the ruby-crowned wren (?)¹ flies and mews over. Some parts of the meadow are covered with thin ice, through which we row, — which yet lasts all day, — and the waves we make in the river nibble and crumble its edge, and produce a rustling of the grass and reeds, as if a muskrat were stirring.

We land behind Tarbell's and walk inland. How warm in the hollows! The outline of the hills is very agreeable there; ridgy hills, with backs to them, and a perfect cow-path winds along the side of one. They have such weight to carry that they select the easiest course.

Again embark. It is remarkably calm and warm in the sun, now that we have brought a hill between us and the wind. There goes a muskrat. He leaves so long a ripple behind that in this light you cannot tell where his body ends, and think him longer than he is.

¹ *Fringilla linaria*.

This is a glorious river-reach. At length we pass the bridge. Everywhere the muskrat-houses line the shores, — or what *was* the shore, — some three feet high and regularly sharp as the Peak of Teneriffe.

C. says, "Let us land" (in an orchard by Atkins's (?) boathouse). "The angle of incidents should be equal to the angle of reflection." We did so. By the island where I formerly camped, half a mile or more above the bridge on the road from Chelmsford to Bedford, we saw a mink, a slender black (at ten rods' distance; Emmons says they are a "dark glossy brown"), very like a weasel in form. He alternately ran along on the ice and swam in the water, now and then holding up his head and long neck and looking at us. Not so shy as a muskrat, but I should say very black. The muskrats would curl up into a ball on the ice, decidedly reddish brown. The ice made no show, being thin and dark. Mink's head is larger in proportion to body than the muskrat's, not so sharp and rat-like.

Left our boat just above the last-named bridge on west side. A bright dazzling sheen for miles on the river as you looked up it. Crossed the bridge, turned into a path on the left, and ascended a hill a mile and a half off, between us and Billerica, somewhat off from the river. The Concord affords the water prospects of a larger river, like the Connecticut even. Hereabouts I found a spear-head, by a mysterious little building. Dined on the hill, from which we saw Billerica centre, a mile and a half northerly. We had crossed what by

the map must be the brook from Nutting's Pond. On the west side of the river in Billerica here, is a grand range of hills, somewhat cliffy, covered with young oaks, whose leaves now give it a red appearance, even when seen from Ball's Hill. It is one of the most interesting and novel features in the river scenery.

Men commonly talk as if genius were something proper to an individual. I esteem it but a common privilege, and if one does not enjoy it now, he may congratulate his neighbor that *he* does. There is no place for man-worship. We understand very well a man's relation, not to *his* genius, but to the genius.

Returning, the water is smoother and more beautiful than ever. The ripples we make produce ribbed reflections or shadows on the dense but leafless bushes on shore, thirty or forty rods distant, very regular, and so far that they seem motionless and permanent. Again we see the mink, plainer than ever. The smooth river-reaches, so calm and glorious in this light, "I see, not feel, how beautiful they are." All the water behind us as we row (and even on the right and left at a distance) is perfectly unrippled, we move so fast; but before us, down-stream, it is all in commotion from shore to shore. There are some fine shadows on those grand red oaken hills in the north. What a fine color to last through summer!

We look at Atkins's boathouse, ugly, like a barn carried off and lodged in the river. A muskrat had made his cabin in the bathing-apartment. Man's boathouse is a deformity, but the muskrats' cabins are an ornament to the river. The squareness of the former

building, roof and all, offend. Could not the architect take a hint from the pyramidal or conical form of the muskrat's house? Something of this form and color, like a large haycock in the meadow, would be in harmony with the scenery. The muskrat's house is made in the midst of weeds or bushes commonly, which protect it from the waves. When a muskrat comes to the surface too near you, how quickly and with what force he turns and plunges again, making a sound in the calm water as if you had thrown into it a large stone with violence!

Long did it take to sink the Carlisle Bridge. The reflections after sunset were distinct and glorious,—the heaven into which we unceasingly rowed. I thought now that the angle of reflection was greater than the angle of *incidents*. It cooler grew. The stars came out soon after we turned Ball's Hill, and it became difficult to distinguish our course. The boatman knows a river by reaches. We ran part way into several holts, or *poke-logans*. Got home in the dark, our feet and legs numb and cold with sitting and inactivity, having been about eight miles by river, etc. It was some time before we recovered the full use of our cramped legs. I forgot to speak of the afterglows. The twilight, in fact, had several stages to it, and several times after it had grown dusky the twilight acquired a new transparency, and the trees on the hillsides were lit up again.

Dec. 5. P. M. — Rowed over Walden!

A dark, but warm, misty day, completely overcast.

This great rise of the pond after an interval of many

years, and the water standing at this great height for a year or more, kills the shrubs and trees about its edge, — pitch pines, birches, alders, aspens, etc., — and, falling again, leaves an unobstructed shore. The rise and fall of the pond serves this use at least. This fluctuation, though it makes it difficult to walk round it when the water is highest, by killing the trees makes it so much the easier and more agreeable when the water is low. By this fluctuation, this rise of its waters after long intervals, it asserts its title to a shore, and the trees cannot hold it by right of possession. But unlike those waters which are subject to a daily tide, its shore is cleanest when the water is lowest. I have been surprised to observe how surely the water standing for a few months about such trees would kill them. On the side of the pond next my house a row of pitch pines fifteen feet high was killed and tipped over as if by a lever, and thus a stop put to their encroachments; and their size may indicate how many years had elapsed since the last rise.¹ I have been surprised to see what a rampart has been formed about many ponds, — in one place at Walden, but especially at Flint's Pond, where it occurs between the pond and a swamp, as if it were the remains of an Indian swamp fort, — apparently by the action of the waves and the ice, several feet in height and containing large stones and trees. These lips of the lake, on which no beard grows. It licks its chops from time to time.²

I saw some dimples on the surface, and, thinking it

¹ [Walden, pp. 201, 202; Riv. 284, 285.]

² [Walden, p. 202; Riv. 285.]

was going to rain hard immediately, the air being full of mist, I made haste to take my place at the oars to row homeward. Already the rain seemed rapidly increasing, though I felt none on my cheek, and I anticipated a thorough soaking; but suddenly the dimples ceased, for they were produced by the perch which the noise of my oars had scared into the depths. I saw their schools dimly disappearing.¹

I have said that Walden has no visible inlet nor outlet, but it is on the one hand distantly and indirectly related to Flint's Pond, which is more elevated, by a chain of small ponds coming from that quarter, and on the other hand directly and manifestly related to Concord River, which is lower, by a similar chain of ponds, through which in some other geological period it may have flowed thither, and by a little digging, which God forbid, could probably be made to flow thither again. If, by living thus "reserved and austere" like a hermit in the woods so long, it has acquired such wonderful depth and purity, who would not regret that the impure waters of Flint's Pond should be mingled with it, or itself should go waste its sweetness in the ocean wave?²

Dec. 6. Though foul weather yesterday, this is the warmest and pleasantest day yet. Cows are turned out to pasture again. On the Corner causeway fine cobwebs glimmer in the air, covering the willow twigs and the road, and sometimes stretching from side to side

¹ [Walden, p. 211; Riv. 298.]

² [Walden, p. 215; Riv. 303, 304.]

above my head. I see many little gnat-like insects in the air there. Tansy still fresh, and I saw autumnal dandelion a few days since. In the evening I see the spearer's light on the river. Saw a great slate-colored hawk sail away from the Cliffs.

Dec. 7. P. M. — Perhaps the warmest day yet. True Indian summer. The walker perspires. The shepherd's-purse is in full bloom; the andromeda not turned red. Saw a pile of snow-fleas in a rut in the wood-path, six or seven inches long and three quarters of an inch high, to the eye exactly like powder, as if a sportsman had spilled it from his flask; and when a stick was passed through the living and skipping mass, each side of the furrow preserved its edge as in powder.

Dec. 8. Another Indian-summer day. Saw some puffballs in the woods, wonderfully full of sulphur-like dust, which yellowed my shoes, greenish-yellow. The recent water-line at Walden is quite distinct, though like the limit of a shadow, on the alders about eighteen inches above the present level. One cannot burn or bury even his old shoes without a feeling of sadness and compassion; much more [*sic*] his old body, without a slight sense of guilt.

Dec. 9. P. M. — To C. Smith's Hill.

Those little ruby-crowned wrens (?)¹ still about. They suddenly dash away from this side to that in flocks, with a tumultuous note, half jingle, half rattle,

¹ Lesser redpolls.

like nuts shaken in a bag, or a bushel of nutshells, soon returning to the tree they had forsaken on some alarm. They are oftenest seen on the white birch, apparently feeding on its seeds, scattering the scales about.

A fresh dandelion.

The chestnuts are almost as plenty as ever, both in the fallen burs and out of them. There are more this year than the squirrels can consume. I picked three pints this afternoon, and though some bought at a store the other day were more than half mouldy, I did not find one mouldy one among these which I picked from under the wet and mouldy leaves, where they have been snowed on once. Probably they do not heat, though wet. These are also still plump and tender. I love to gather them, if only for the sense of the bountifulness of nature they give me.¹

A few petals of the witch-hazel still hold on.

In the "Homes of American Authors" it is said of most that at one time they wrote for the *North American Review*. It is one of my qualifications that I have not written an article for the *North American Review*.

A man tells me he saw a violet to-day.

Very nice; as the old lady said when she had got a gravestone for her husband.

Dec. 12. Cold at last. Saw a violet on the C. Miles road where the bank had been burned in the fall. *Baomyces roseus* also. Tansy still fresh yellow by the Corner Bridge. From Cliffs I see snow on the

¹ [*Excursions*, p. 197; Riv. 241. See also p. 462 (Jan. 10, 1853).]

mountains. Last night's rain was snow there, then. They now have a parti-colored look, like the skin of a pard, as if they were spread with a saddle-cloth for Boreas to ride. I hear of a cultivated rose blossoming in a garden in Cambridge within a day or two. The buds of the aspen are large and show wool in the fall.

Dec. 13. Walk early through the woods to Lincoln to survey. Winter weather may be said to have begun yesterday. River and ponds all open. Goose Pond skimmed over. Why have I ever omitted early rising and a morning walk?

As we walked over the Cedar Hill, Mr. Weston asked me if I had ever noticed how the frost formed around a particular weed in the grass, and no other. It was a clear cold morning. We stooped to examine, and I observed, about the base of the *Lechea major* (?), or larger pinweed,¹ the frost formed into little flattened trumpets or bells, an inch or more long, with the mouth down about the base of the stem. They were very conspicuous, dotting the grass white. But what was most remarkable was that, though there were plenty of other dead weeds and grasses about, no other species exhibited this phenomenon. I think it can hardly be because of the form of its top, and that therefore the moisture is collected and condensed and flows down its stem particularly. It may have something to do with the life of the root, which I noticed was putting forth shoots *beneath*. Perhaps this growth generates heat

¹ [*Lechea* . . . pinweed" crossed out in pencil and "cistus" substituted.]

and so steam. He said that his cows never touched that weed. I judge from his account of the rise and fall of Flint's Pond that, allowing for the disturbance occasioned by its inlets and outlet, it sympathizes with Walden.¹

I observed a mouse run down a bush by the pond-side. I approached and found that he had neatly covered over a thrasher or other bird's nest (it was made partly of sticks like a thrasher's), about four or five feet from the ground, and lined it warmly with that common kind of green moss (?) which grows about the base of oaks, but chiefly with a kind [of] vegetable wool, perhaps from the wool-grass. He appeared to be a reddish brown above and cream-colored beneath, and ran swiftly down the stems. I think it must be the *Gerbilus Canadensis*, or perhaps the *Arvicola Emmonsii*, or maybe the *Arvicola hirsutus*, meadow mouse.²

Began to snow at noon. This the third snow; the first lasted half an hour on ground; the second, two or three days.

Dec. 14. Tuesday. P. M. — To Assabet Stone Bridge.

We have now the scenery of winter, though the snow is but an inch or two deep. The dried chalice of the *Rhexia Virginica* stand above the snow, and the cups of the blue-curls and the long sharp red capsules of the small (?) hypericum, etc., etc., johnswort; and a new era commences with the dried herbs.

¹ [Walden, p. 201; Riv. 284.]

² *Vide* forward to Dec. 30th.

Ah, who can tell the serenity and clarity of a New England winter sunset? This could not be till the cold and the snow came. Ah, what isles those western clouds! in what a sea! Just after sunset there is a broad pillar of light for many minutes in the west.

Dec. 15. Saw a small flock of geese go over.

One's *life*, the enterprise he is here upon, should certainly be a grand fact to consider, not a mean or insignificant one. A man should not live without a purpose, and that purpose must surely be a grand one. But is this fact of "our life" commonly but a puff of air, a flash in the pan, a smoke, a nothing? It does not afford arena for a tragedy.

Dec. 16. Observed the reflection of the snow on Pine Hill from Walden, extending far beyond the true




limits of a reflection, quite across the pond; also, less obviously, of pines. The sky overcast with thick scud, which, in the reflection, the snow ran into.

Dec. 18. P. M. — To Annursnack.

Sedum Telephium, garden orpine or live-for-ever; I think this is the plant with a sort of pineapple-leaved and sheathed bulbs, on a rock between Cox's and Heywood's.¹ Saw where a red squirrel (tinged gray) had

¹ No. *Sempervivum tectorum*.

been eating the hips of a sweet-briar, which had apparently grown recently, leaves still fresh and green. Very cold, windy day. The crust of the slight snow covered in some woods with the scales (bird-shaped) of the birch, and their seeds. Loring's Pond  beautifully frozen. So polished a surface, I mistook many parts of it for water. It was *waved* or *watered* with a slight dust nevertheless. Cracked into large squares like the faces of a reflector, it was so exquisitely polished that the sky and scudding dun-colored clouds, with mother-o'-pearl tints, were reflected in it as in the calmest water. I slid over it with a little misgiving, mistaking the ice before me for water. This is the first skating. Still the little ruby-crowned birds about.

Dec. 22. *Wednesday*. Surveying the Hunt Farm this and the 20th.

C. says that Flint's Pond was frozen *over* yesterday. A rambling, rocky, wild, moorish pasture, this of Hunt's, with two or three great white oaks to shade the cattle, which the farmer would not take fifty dollars apiece for, though the ship-builder wanted them. The snow balled so badly to-day while I was working in the swamp, that I was set up full four inches. It is pleasant, cutting a path through the bushes in a swamp, to see the color of the different woods, — the yellowish dogwood, the green prinns (?), and, on the upland, the splendid yellow barberry. The squirrel, rabbit, fox tracks, etc., attract the attention in the new-fallen snow; and the squirrel nests, bunches of grass and leaves high

in the trees, more conspicuous if not larger now, or the glimpse of a meadow (?) mouse, give occasion for a remark. You cannot go out so early but you will find the track of some wild creature. Returning home just after the sun had sunk below the horizon, I saw from N. Barrett's a fire made by boys on the ice near the Red Bridge, which looked like a bright reflection of a setting sun from the water under the bridge, so clear, so little lurid, in this winter evening air.

Dec. 27. Monday. Not a particle of ice in Walden to-day. Paddled across it. I took my new boat out. A black and white duck on it, Flint's and Fair Haven being frozen up. Ground bare. River open. Countless birches, white pines, etc., have been killed within a year or two about Goose Pond by the high water. The dead birches have broken in two in the middle and fallen over. In some coves where the water is shallow, their wrecks make quite a dense thicket. Found chestnuts quite plenty to-day.

Dec. 28. Brought my boat from Walden in rain. No snow on ground. Grass in the churchyard and elsewhere green as in the spring.

I omitted some observations apparently between the 18th and 22d, to the effect that the berries that hold on into winter are to be remarked, — the winterberry, alder and birch fruit, smilax, pyrus, hips, etc.

Both for bodily and mental health, court the present. Embrace health wherever you find her. A clump of birches raying out from one centre make a more agree-

able object than a single tree. The rosettes in the ice, as Channing calls them, now and for some time have attracted me.

It is worth the while to apply what wisdom one has to the conduct of his life, surely. I find myself oftenest wise in little things and foolish in great ones. That I may accomplish some particular petty affair well, I live my whole life coarsely. A broad margin of leisure is as beautiful in a man's life as in a book. Haste makes waste, no less in life than in housekeeping. Keep the time, observe the hours of the universe, not of the cars. What are threescore years and ten hurriedly and coarsely lived to moments of divine leisure in which your life is coincident with the life of the universe? We live too fast and coarsely, just as we eat too fast, and do not know the true savor of our food. We consult our will and understanding and the expectation of men, not our genius. I can impose upon myself tasks which will crush me for life and prevent all expansion, and this I am but too inclined to do.

One moment of life costs many hours, hours not of business but of preparation and invitation. Yet the man who does not betake himself at once and desperately to sawing is called a loafer, though he may be knocking at the doors of heaven all the while, which shall surely be opened to him. That aim in life is highest which requires the highest and finest discipline. How much, what infinite, leisure it requires, as of a lifetime, to appreciate a single phenomenon! You must camp down beside it as for life, having reached your land of promise, and give yourself wholly to it. It must

stand for the whole world to you, symbolical of all things. The least partialness is your own defect of sight and cheapens the experience fatally. Unless the humming of a gnat is as the music of the spheres, and the music of the spheres is as the humming of a gnat, they are naught to me. It is not communications to serve for a history, — which are science, — but the great story itself, that cheers and satisfies us.

As I have not observed the rainbow on the *Juncus militaris* nor the andromeda red the past fall, it suggests a great difference in seasons.

Dec. 30. In Audubon's Animals:—

Sigmodon hispidum, Say and Ord.

Marsh-Rat of Lawsen's Carolina.

Wood-Rat, Bartram's Travels in Florida.

Arvicola hispidus, Godman.

Arvicola hortensis of Griffith and of Cuvier.

The plate of this *resembles* my mouse of December 13th.

Dec. 31. I was this afternoon gathering chestnuts at Saw Mill Brook. I have within a few weeks spent some hours thus, scraping away the leaves with my hands and feet over some square rods, and have at least learned how chestnuts are planted and new forests raised. First fall the chestnuts with the severe frosts, the greater part of them at least, and then, at length, the rains and winds bring down the leaves which cover them with a thick coat. I have wondered sometimes how the nuts got planted which merely fell

on to the surface of the earth, but already I find the nuts of the present year partially mixed with the mould, as it were, under the decaying and mouldy leaves, where is all the moisture and manure they want. A large proportion of this year's nuts are now covered loosely an inch deep under mouldy leaves, though they are themselves sound, and are moreover concealed from squirrels thus.¹

It is a sort of frozen rain this afternoon, which does not wet one, but makes the still bare ground slippery with a coating of ice, and stiffens your umbrella so that it cannot be shut. Will not the trees look finely in the morning?

¹ [Excursions, p. 196; Riv. 240, 241.]