

THOREAU

BY

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WITH NOTES BY

EDWARD WALDO EMERSON

A queen rejoices in her peers,
And wary Nature knows her own,
By court and city, dale and down,
And like a lover volunteers,
And to her son will treasures more,
And more to purpose, freely pour
In one wood walk, than learned men
Will find with glass in ten times ten.

It seemed as if the breezes brought him,
It seemed as if the sparrows taught him,
As if by secret sign he knew
Where in far fields the orchis grew.

THOREAU¹

¹ In May, 1862, Thoreau died, at the age of forty-four, in Concord, where he was born. Consumption had been in his family, and attacked even his rugged frame after an unusual exposure, the sitting long in the snow counting the growth-rings on some stumps. His illness was long and progressive, but his courage and good cheer, and his affection towards his family, showed throughout. He worked on his manuscripts until within a few weeks of his death. In a remarkable letter written about six weeks before it occurred, he said, "I suppose I have not many months to live; but of course I know nothing about it. I may add that I am enjoying existence as much as ever and regret nothing."* His funeral services were held in the meeting-house of the First Church. His neighbor the Rev. Mr. Reynolds made the prayer, a poem by his friend William Ellery Channing was sung, and Mr. Emerson made the address. In the following August his remarks, with some additions, were printed in the present form in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

In 1837 Mrs. Emerson's elder sister, Mrs. Lucy C. Brown, who boarded in the Thoreau family, and to whom many of Thoreau's published letters were written, called Mr. Emerson's attention to the independence of the thoughts, and the similarity to his own, of some writings of the young Henry, who had just graduated from Harvard College. Mr. Emerson was interested, and asked her to bring her young friend to see him. Thus began a friendship which, in spite of the difference of fourteen years in their ages, and of temperamental impediments to its fullest enjoyment, was deep and lasting. In the spring of 1841 Thoreau, by Mr. Emerson's invitation, came to live in his family like a younger brother, giving help in the care of the garden and poultry, and applying his Yankee "faculty" to any household exigency, yet having much of his time for his own pursuits. He bore the severe test of close association well, and won increasing respect and regard from his host and hostess. With such a master of arts in the house, Mr. Emerson was relieved of many questions, cares and tasks that he had no fitness to deal with, though he often worked in the garden with his friend. Thoreau showed a chivalric devotion to Mrs. Emerson, or more properly, regarded her as a priestess, as his fine letters to her show. His treatment of children, who always delighted in him, was perfect,—a delightful playfellow, yet always with reverence for childhood. In the note to the poem "Threnody" is an extract from Mr. Emerson's journal telling of his friend's devotion to little Waldo.

When Thoreau's years of teaching and pencil-making and the Walden episode were over, he came once more into his friend's home, this time to be man-of-the-house during Mr. Emerson's absence in England in 1847-48, and

* *Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau*, edited by F. B. Sanborn. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1895.

Henry David Thoreau was the last male descendant of a French ancestor who came to this country from the Isle of Guernsey. His character

and again his conduct of his trust was perfect. To know Thoreau as he was, the reading of his *Familiar Letters*, above alluded to, and the extracts from his journal, must supplement the reading of the books published by him. In them, as in conversation with men who were his friends, there was a tendency to startle, to controvert and to provoke argument. This was inherited from the Scotch Dunbar blood on his mother's side, and was a distinct misfortune, standing in the way of perfect relations. In his letters the true, pure man and loyal friend appears. Living so long, at the most impressionable age, in close relation with an older friend and scholar, whom he honored, and with whose views, then considered heretical, he sympathized, it was not unnatural that his manner of thought and his style should have been legitimately influenced, and even some superficial trick of manner or speech unconsciously acquired. Hence the charge of imitation has been brought against Thoreau. Doubtless his growth was stimulated by kindred ideas. This is all that can be granted. Utter independence, strong individuality distinguished him. His one foible was, not subserviency, but combativeness, mainly from mere love of fence when he found a worthy adversary, as his best friends knew almost too well.

Although their personal relations could not be close, each held the other in highest honor. In 1852 Mr. Emerson wrote in his journal:—

“I am my own man more than most men, yet the loss of a few persons would be most impoverishing, a few persons who give flesh to what were else mere thoughts, and which now I am not at liberty to slight or in any manner treat as fictions. [He speaks of Alcott, and then goes on.] And Thoreau gives me in flesh and blood and pertinacious Saxon belief my own ethics. He is far more real, and daily practically obeying them than I, and fortifies my memory at all times with an affirmative experience which refuses to be set aside.”

This sketch of Thoreau by a friend who had known him for twenty-five years with increasing respect for the genuineness of his knowledge, the truth of his mind and the nobility of his character, is important as a corrective to the essay on Thoreau by Lowell, who knew little of him directly. Yet Lowell, after some nine pages of ridicule, which is what catches the eye and leaves the impression on the casual reader, says in a page or two what, if true, should make all that precedes as dust in the balance.

exhibited occasional traits drawn from this blood, in singular combination with a very strong Saxon genius. He was born in Concord, Massachusetts, on the 12th of July, 1817. He was graduated at Harvard College in 1837, but without any literary distinction. An iconoclast in literature, he seldom thanked colleges for their service to him, holding them in small esteem, whilst yet his debt to them was important. After leaving the University, he joined his brother in teaching a private school, which he soon renounced.²

His father was a manufacturer of lead-pencils, and Henry applied himself for a time to this craft, believing he could make a better pencil than was then in use. After completing his experiments, he exhibited his work to chemists and artists in Boston, and having obtained their certificates to its excellence and to its equality with the best London manufacture, he returned home contented. His friends congratulated him that he had now opened his way to fortune. But he replied that he should never make another pencil. "Why should I? I would not do again what I have done once." He resumed his endless walks and miscellaneous studies, making

² Thoreau records that he did not cry when, at the age of three months, he was baptized by the venerable Puritan Dr. Ripley. In college both he and Emerson won disapproval from the authorities, and great and permanent advantage for themselves, by introducing the elective system in their own cases. It escaped Mr. Emerson's notice that Thoreau had a "Part" at his Commencement: with a classmate he had a Conference on "The Commercial Spirit," which, it is unnecessary to say, he attacked. This paper, written at the age of twenty, has the originality and beauty which characterized his later writing. Mr. Sanborn gives extracts from it in the *Familiar Letters*.

With regard to the French, or more properly Breton, element in Thoreau, Mr. Emerson quotes a friend as saying: "Here is the precise *voyageur* of Canada sublimed or carried up to the seventh power. In the family, the brother and one sister preserved the French character of face."

With regard to the private school of John and Henry Thoreau, I collected the testimony, some twenty years since, of such of the scholars as I could find, and all but one (who was not very bright and had been among the younger pupils) had remembered it as a privilege of their lives; they loved John and respected Henry.

every day some new acquaintance with Nature, though as yet never speaking of zoölogy or botany, since, though very studious of natural facts, he was incurious of technical and textual science.³

At this time, a strong, healthy youth, fresh from college, whilst all his companions were choosing their profession, or eager to begin some lucrative employment, it was inevitable that his thoughts should be exercised on the same question, and it required rare decision to refuse all the accustomed paths and keep his solitary freedom at the cost of disappointing the natural expectations of his family and friends: all the more difficult that he had a perfect probity, was exact in securing his own independence, and in holding every man to the like duty. But Thoreau never faltered. He was a born protestant. He declined to give up his large ambition of knowledge and action for any narrow craft or profession, aiming at a much more comprehensive calling, the art of living well. If he slighted and defied the opinions of others, it was only that he was more intent to reconcile his practice with his own belief. Never idle or self-indulgent, he preferred, when he wanted money, earning it by some piece of manual labor agreeable to him, as building a boat or a fence, planting,

³ It is a fact not generally known, for Thoreau did not deign to notice the gossip of his neighbors, that when he left his father's occupation of the lead-pencil manufacture because he wished to do business with the Celestial City, his family, largely through his means, had a lucrative business. His reading in college gave him the knowledge of the best ingredient to mix with the plumbago, for which purpose bay-berry wax had hitherto been used here. His own ingenuity probably had a large part in the invention of a simple but perfect way of grinding the lead to an impalpable powder. Thus the greasiness and grit of American lead-pencils were got rid of. The new art of electrotyping demanded the best plumbago, and the Thoreaus had practically the monopoly by the excellence of their lead. After the death of his father, even up to the time of his own illness, Henry gave necessary oversight to the mill in Acton, and helped in the heavier part of packing the product, when necessary.

grafting, surveying or other short work, to any long engagements. With his hardy habits and few wants, his skill in wood-craft, and his powerful arithmetic, he was very competent to live in any part of the world. It would cost him less time to supply his wants than another. He was therefore secure of his leisure.⁴

A natural skill for mensuration, growing out of his mathematical knowledge and his habit of ascertaining the measures and distances of objects which interested him, the size of trees, the depth and extent of ponds and rivers, the height of mountains and the air-line distance of his favorite summits,—this, and his intimate knowledge of the territory about Concord, made him drift into the profession of land-surveyor. It had the advantage for him that it led him continually into new and secluded grounds, and helped his studies of Nature. His accuracy and skill in this work were readily appreciated, and he found all the employment he wanted.

He could easily solve the problems of the surveyor, but he was daily beset with graver questions, which he manfully confronted. He interrogated every custom, and wished to settle all his practice on an ideal

⁴ The first mention of Thoreau in Mr. Emerson's journal is on February 11, 1838:

"At the 'teachers' meeting' last night my good ——, after disclaiming any wish to difference Jesus from a human mind, suddenly seemed to alter his tone and said that Jesus made the world and was the Eternal God. Henry Thoreau merely remarked that 'Mr. —— had kicked the pail over.' I delight much in my young friend, who seems to have as free and erect a mind as any I have ever met."

His friend copied with pleasure from Thoreau's journal of 1855 and 1856 the following notes of heroic satisfaction in asceticism:—

"What you call bareness and poverty is to me simplicity."

And again:—

"Ah! how I have thriven on solitude and poverty. I cannot overstate this advantage."

foundation. He was a protestant *à outrance* and few lives contain so many renunciations. He was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State; he ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco; and, though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun.⁵ He chose, wisely no doubt for himself, to be the bachelor of thought and Nature. He had no talent for wealth, and knew how to be poor without the least hint of squalor or inelegance. Perhaps he fell into his way of living without forecasting it much, but approved it with later wisdom. "I am often reminded," he wrote in his journal, "that if I had bestowed on me the wealth of Croesus, my aims must be still the same, and my means essentially the same." He had no temptations to fight against,—no appetites, no passions, no taste for elegant trifles. A fine house, dress, the manners and talk of highly cultivated people were all thrown away on him. He much preferred a good Indian, and considered these refinements

⁵ The statements here made, though true in spirit, need a little qualification. As a boy and youth he was expert as a hunter, and notably so as a fisherman. The gun and rod are almost invariably the first guides of a lover of Nature to wood and stream. He soon passed through this novitiate. His last use of the gun was probably when he confesses to have "effected the transmigration of a woodchuck" which was destroying his bean-crop at Walden, but the pond fed him occasionally with her fishes, and he caught and procured many specimens of all the Concord fishes for Agassiz's collection. While never man cared less what he ate, and he could have lived simply as an Esquimau without complaint, he was a man of too large pattern to live by any rule of thumb. Much foolish outcry was raised because he was too kindly a son to thrust back the little gifts which his loving mother, when he went to see her, sometimes begged him to take back with him to his cabin. At the table of friends he ate what was set before him, instead of making the self-conscious protests of contemporary reformers. Many persons now gone have testified to the writer, what he also remembers well, the charm and the helpfulness of Thoreau's society. He was the best of sons and brothers, and lived at home all but the two years of his life spent at Walden, the years when he was at college, and the short period when he taught in Staten Island. While always helpful, he kept his mind, his hands and feet free from all bondage.

as impediments to conversation, wishing to meet his companion on the simplest terms. He declined invitations to dinner-parties, because there each was in every one's way, and he could not meet the individuals to any purpose. "They make their pride," he said, "in making their dinner cost much; I make my pride in making my dinner cost little."⁶ When asked at table what dish he preferred, he answered, "The nearest." He did not like the taste of wine, and never had a vice in his life. He said,—“I have a faint recollection of pleasure derived from smoking dried lily-stems, before I was a man. I had commonly a supply of these. I have never smoked anything more noxious.”

He chose to be rich by making his wants few, and supplying them himself. In his travels, he used the railroad only to get over so much country as was unimportant to the present purpose, walking hundreds of miles, avoiding taverns, buying a lodging in farmers and fishermen's houses, as cheaper, and more agreeable to him, and because there he could better find the men and the information he wanted.

There was somewhat military in his nature, not to be subdued, 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 cost him nothing to say No; indeed he found it much easier than to say Yes. It seemed as if his first instinct on hearing a proposition was to controvert it, so impatient was he of the limitations of

⁶ "We dine," he said, "at the sign of the scrub-oak."

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. "I love Henry," said one of his friends, "but I cannot like him; and as for taking his arm, I should as soon think of taking the arm of an elm-tree."⁷

Yet, hermit and stoic as he was, he was really fond of sympathy, and threw himself heartily and childlike into the company of young people whom he loved, and whom he delighted to entertain, as he only could, with the varied and endless anecdotes of his experiences by field and river: and he was always ready to lead a huckleberry-party or a search for chestnuts or grapes. Talking, one day, of a public discourse, Henry remarked that whatever succeeded with the audience was bad. I said, "Who would not like to write something which all can read, like Robinson Crusoe? and who does not see with regret that his page is not solid with a right materialistic treatment, which delights everybody?" Henry objected, of course, and vaunted the better lectures which reached only a few persons. But, at supper, a young girl, understanding that he was to lecture at the Lyceum, sharply asked him, "Whether his lecture would be a nice, interesting story, such as she wished to hear, or whether it was one of those old philosophical things that she did not care about." Henry turned to her, and bethought himself, and, I saw, was trying to believe that he had

⁷ This was Mr. Emerson's own remark.

matter that might fit her and her brother, who were to sit up and go to the lecture, if it was a good one for them.⁸

He was a speaker and actor of the truth, born such, and was ever running into dramatic situations from this cause. In any circumstance it interested all bystanders to know what part Henry would take, and what he would say; and he did not disappoint expectation, but used an original judgment on each emergency. In 1845 he built himself a small framed house on the shores of Walden Pond, and lived there two years alone, a life of labor and study. This action was quite native and fit for him. No one who knew him would tax him with affectation. He was more unlike his neighbors in his thought than in his action. As soon as he had exhausted the advantages of that solitude, he abandoned it. In 1847, not approving some uses to which the public expenditure was applied, he refused to pay his town tax, and was put in jail. A friend paid the tax for him, and he was released. The like annoyance was threatened the next year. But as his friends paid the tax, notwithstanding his protest, I believe he ceased to

⁸ Some lines of William Morris, from the Proem to the *Earthly Paradise*, exactly describe Thoreau's gift to his townspeople in the old Lyceum, on those dreary winter nights when he read us his "Wild Apples" or "Autumnal Tints":*—

"Folk say, a wizard to a Northern king
At Christmas-tide such wondrous things did show,
That through one window men beheld the Spring,
And through another saw the Summer glow,
And through a third the fruited vines a-row,
While still, unheard, yet in its wonted way,
Piped the drear wind of that December day."

*These lectures are printed in Thoreau's *Excursions*.

resist.⁹ No opposition or ridicule had any weight with him. He coldly and fully stated his opinion without affecting to believe that it was the opinion of the company. It was of no consequence if every one present held the opposite opinion. On one occasion he went to the University Library to procure some books. The librarian refused to lend them. Mr. Thoreau repaired to the President, who stated to him the rules and usages, which permitted the loan of books to resident graduates, to clergymen who were alumni, and to some others resident within a circle often miles radius from the College. Mr. Thoreau explained to the President that the railroad had destroyed the old scale of distances,—that the library was useless, yes, and President and College useless, on the terms of his rules, that the one benefit he owed to the College was its library,—that, at this moment, not only his want of books was imperative, but he wanted a large number of books, and assured him that he, Thoreau and not the librarian, was the proper custodian of these. In short, the President found the petitioner so

⁹ Thoreau had become disgusted with the Government at the time of the Mexican War. He said that only once a year did he come in contact with it in the person of the tax-collector, and refusal to pay his tax seemed his obvious way of protest against the evil measures of the day. He thus washed his hands of any share, possibly not knowing that his town and county tax went entirely for innocent and useful purposes. Samuel Staples, at once the tax-gatherer, constable and jailer, a downright friendly man, offered to pay the small tax for him, but Thoreau would not allow this, so Staples said, "Henry, if you don't pay, I shall have to lock you up pretty soon." "As well now as any time, Sam," was the answer. "Well, come along then," said Staples, and put him in jail. The tax was left at the jailer's house next day when he was away from home. He told me that he never knew who paid it, but, if I recollect rightly, said that he supposed that it was Miss Elizabeth Hoar, or her father, through his hands. Of course then he released his prisoner, and, as he said earlier concerning Mr. Alcott's refusal to pay taxes, "I vum, I believe it was nothing but principle," held the same opinion of Thoreau's action. They were always good friends. Mr. Staples, coming out from visiting Thoreau during his sickness, met Mr. Emerson coming in, and said to him, "I never saw a man dying with so much pleasure and peace."

formidable, and the rules getting to look so ridiculous, that he ended by giving him a privilege which in his hands proved unlimited thereafter.

No truer American existed than Thoreau. His preference of his country and condition was genuine, and his aversion from English and European manners and tastes almost reached contempt. He listened impatiently to news or *bonmots* gleaned from London circles; and though he tried to be civil, these anecdotes fatigued him. The men were all imitating each other, and on a small mould. Why can they not live as far apart as possible, and each be a man by himself? What he sought was the most energetic nature; and he wished to go to Oregon, not to London. "In every part of Great Britain," he wrote in his diary, "are discovered traces of the Romans, their funereal urns, their camps, their roads, their dwellings. But New England, at least, is not based on any Roman ruins. We have not to lay the foundations of our houses on the ashes of a former civilization."

But idealist as he was, standing for abolition of slavery, abolition of tariffs, almost for abolition of government, it is needless to say he found himself not only unrepresented in actual politics, but almost equally opposed to every class of reformers. Yet he paid the tribute of his uniform respect to the Anti-Slavery party. One man, whose personal acquaintance he had formed, he honored with exceptional regard. Before the first friendly word had been spoken for Captain John Brown, he sent notices to most houses in Concord that he would speak in a public hall on the condition and character of John Brown, on Sunday evening, and invited all people to come. The Republican Committee, the Abolitionist Committee, sent him word that it was premature and not advisable. He replied,—“I did not send to you for advice, but to announce that I am to speak.” The hall

was filled at an early hour by people of all parties, and his earnest eulogy of the hero was heard by all respectfully, by many with a sympathy that surprised themselves.¹⁰

It was said of Plotinus that he was ashamed of his body, and it is very likely he had good reason for it,—that his body was a bad servant, and he had not skill in dealing with the material world, as happens often to men of abstract intellect. But Mr. Thoreau was equipped with a most adapted and serviceable body. He was of short stature, firmly built, of light complexion, with strong, serious blue eyes, and a grave aspect,—his face covered in the late years with a becoming beard. His senses were acute, his frame well-knit and hardy, his hands strong and skilful in the use of tools. And there was a wonderful fitness of body and mind. He could pace sixteen rods more accurately than another man could measure them with rod and chain. He could find his path in the woods at night, he said, better by his feet than his eyes. He could estimate the measure of a tree very well by his eye; he could estimate the weight of a calf or a pig, like a dealer. From a box containing a bushel or more of loose pencils, he could take up with his hands fast enough just a dozen pencils at every grasp. He was a good swimmer, runner, skater, boatman, and would probably outwalk most countrymen in a day's journey. And the relation of body to mind was still finer than we have indicated. He said he wanted

¹⁰ The vestry of the Unitarian church was filled. There stood this man, ordinarily keeping quite clear of political matters, except in occasional protest against slavery and its aggressions, now stirred to the core, and in praise of a hero after his own heart speaking to his rather cool audience, made up in great part of timid people, with the eloquence of passion. The effect, as I recall it, was wonderful. Many of "those who came to scoff remained to pray."

every stride his legs made. The length of his walk uniformly made the length of his writing. If shut up in the house he did not write at all.

He had a strong common sense, like that which Rose Flammock, the weaver's daughter in Scott's romance, commends in her father, as resembling a yardstick, which, whilst it measures dowlas and diaper, can equally well measure tapestry and cloth of gold. He had always a new resource. When I was planting forest trees, and had procured half a peck of acorns, he said that only a small portion of them would be sound, and proceeded to examine them and select the sound ones. But finding this took time, he said, "I think if you put them all into water the good ones will sink;" which experiment we tried with success. He could plan a garden or a house or a barn; would have been competent to lead a "Pacific Exploring Expedition;" could give judicious counsel in the gravest private or public affairs.¹¹

He lived for the day, not cumbered and mortified by his memory. If he brought you yesterday a new proposition, he would bring you to-day another not less revolutionary. A very industrious man, and setting, like all highly organized men, a high value on his time, he seemed the only man of leisure in town, always ready for any excursion that promised well, or for conversation prolonged into late hours. His trenchant sense was never stopped by his rules of daily prudence, but was always up to the new occasion. He liked and used the simplest food, yet, when some one

¹¹ His manly sincerity in speaking the true and elevating word, as shown in his letters, is unsurpassed. His counsel had weight because in requiring life on a high plane he was even more severe with himself than with others.

urged a vegetable diet, Thoreau thought all diets a very small matter, saying that “the man who shoots the buffalo lives better than the man who boards at the Graham House.” He said,—“You can sleep near the railroad, and never be disturbed: Nature knows very well what sounds are worth attending to, and has made up her mind not to hear the railroad-whistle. But things respect the devout mind, and a mental ecstasy was never interrupted.” He noted what repeatedly befell him, that, after receiving from a distance a rare plant, he would presently find the same in his own haunts. And those pieces of luck which happen only to good players happened to him. One day, walking with a stranger, who inquired where Indian arrow-heads could be found, he replied, “Everywhere,” and, stooping forward, picked one on the instant from the ground. At Mount Washington, in Tuckerman’s Ravine, Thoreau had a bad fall, and sprained his foot. As he was in the act of getting up from his fall, he saw for the first time the leaves of the *Arnica mollis*.

His robust common sense, armed with stout hands, keen perceptions and strong will, cannot yet account for the superiority which shone in his simple and hidden life. I must add the cardinal fact, that there was an excellent wisdom in him, proper to a rare class of men, which showed him the material world as a means and symbol. This discovery, which sometimes yields to poets a certain casual and interrupted light, serving for the ornament of their writing, was in him an unsleeping insight; and whatever faults or obstructions of temperament might cloud it, he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. In his youth, he said, one day, “The other world is all my art; my pencils will draw no other; my jack-knife will cut nothing else; I do not use it as a means.” This was the

muse and genius that ruled his opinions, conversation, studies, work and course of life. This made him a searching judge of men. At first glance he measured his companion, and, though insensible to some fine traits of culture, could very well report his weight and calibre. And this made the impression of genius which his conversation sometimes gave.

He understood the matter in hand at a glance, and saw the limitations and poverty of those he talked with, so that nothing seemed concealed from such terrible eyes. I have repeatedly known young men of sensibility converted in a moment to the belief that this was the man they were in search of, the man of men, who could tell them all they should do. His own dealing with them was never affectionate, but superior, didactic, scorning their petty ways,—very slowly conceding, or not conceding at all, the promise of his society at their houses, or even at his own. “Would he not walk with them?” “He did not know. There was nothing so important to him as his walk; he had no walks to throw away on company.” Visits were offered him from respectful parties, but he declined them. Admiring friends offered to carry him at their own cost to the Yellowstone River,—to the West Indies,—to South America. But though nothing could be more grave or considered than his refusals, they remind one, in quite new relations, of that fop Brummel’s reply to the gentleman who offered him his carriage in a shower, “But where will *you* ride, then?”—and what accusing silences, and what searching and irresistible speeches, battering down all defences, his companions can remember!¹²

¹² An over-familiar, officious clergyman, or a gentleman with the conceit of society, or a patronizing editor, found Thoreau, as his friend said of him, “a gendarme good to knock down Cockneys with.” Not so the simple, direct people who minded their business, whether scholars, mechanics or laborers. With them he had good relations. He took an

Mr. Thoreau dedicated his genius with such entire love to the fields, hills and waters of his native town, that he made them known and interesting to all reading Americans, and to people over the sea. The river on whose banks he was born and died he knew from its springs to its confluence with the Merrimack. He had made summer and winter observations on it for many years, and at every hour of the day and night. The result of the recent survey of the Water Commissioners appointed by the State of Massachusetts he had reached by his private experiments, several years earlier. Every fact which occurs in the bed, on the banks or in the air over it; the fishes, and their spawning and nests, their manners, their food; the shad-flies which fill the air on a certain evening once a year, and which are snapped at by the fishes so ravenously that many of these die of repletion; the conical heaps of small stones on the river-shallows, the huge nests of small fishes, one of which will sometimes overflow a cart; the birds which frequent the stream, heron, duck, sheldrake, loon, osprey; the snake, muskrat, otter, woodchuck and fox, on the banks; the turtle, frog, hyla and cricket, which make the banks vocal,—were all known to him, and, as it were, townsmen and fellow creatures; so that he felt an absurdity or violence in any narrative of one of these by itself apart, and still more of its dimensions on an inch-rule, or in the exhibition of its skeleton, or the specimen of a squirrel or a bird in brandy.¹³ He liked to speak of the manners of the river, as itself a lawful creature, yet with exactness, and

active and humane interest in his poor Irish neighbors, lately arrived, and took their part when cheated by mean employers.

¹³ “Even the facts of science,” he said, “may dust the mind by their dryness, unless they are in a sense effaced by the dews of fresh and living truth.”

always to an observed fact. As he knew the river, so the ponds in this region.

One of the weapons he used, more important to him than microscope or alcohol-receiver to other investigators, was a whim which grew on him by indulgence, yet appeared in gravest statement, namely, of extolling his own town and neighborhood as the most favored centre for natural observation. He remarked that the Flora of Massachusetts embraced almost all the important plants of America,—most of the oaks, most of the willows, the best pines, the ash, the maple, the beech, the nuts. He returned Kane's Arctic Voyage to a friend of whom he had borrowed it, with the remark, that "Most of the phenomena noted might be observed in Concord." He seemed a little envious of the Pole, for the coincident sunrise and sunset, or five minutes day after six months: a splendid fact, which Annursnuc had never afforded him. He found red snow in one of his walks, and told me that he expected to find yet the *Victoria regia* in Concord. He was the attorney of the indigenous plants, and owned to a preference of the weeds to the imported plants, as of the Indian to the civilized man, and noticed, with pleasure, that the willow bean-poles of his neighbor had grown more than his beans, "See these weeds," he said, "which have been hoed at by a million farmers all spring and summer, and yet have prevailed, and just now come out triumphant over all lanes, pastures, fields and gardens, such is their vigor. We have insulted them with low names, too,—as Pigweed, Wormwood, Chickweed, Shad-

blossom." He says, "They have brave names, too, Ambrosia, Stellaria, Amelanchier, Amaranth, etc."¹⁴

I think his fancy for referring everything to the meridian of Concord did not grow out of any ignorance or depreciation of other longitudes or latitudes, but was rather a playful expression of his conviction of the indifferency of all places, and that the best place for each is where he stands. He expressed it once in this wise: "I think nothing is to be hoped from you, if this bit of mould under your feet is not sweeter to you to eat than any other in this world, or in any world."¹⁵

The other weapon with which he conquered all obstacles in science was patience. He knew how to sit immovable, a part of the rock he rested on, until the bird, the reptile, the fish, which had retired from him, should come back and resume its habits, nay, moved by curiosity, should come to him and watch him.

It was a pleasure and a privilege to walk with him. He knew the country like a fox or a bird, and passed through it as freely by paths of his own. He knew every track in the snow or on the ground, and what creature had taken this path before him. One must submit abjectly to such a guide, and the reward was great. Under his arm he carried an old music-book to press plants; in his pocket, his diary and pencil, a spy-glass for

¹⁴ In a letter to Mr. Emerson from Staten Island, Thoreau, probably thinking that the weeds would cheer up in his friend's garden now that he was gone, wrote, "I like to think of your living on the banks of the Mill-brook, in the midst of the garden with all its weeds; for what are botanical distinctions at this distance?"

¹⁵ How Thoreau rejoiced in his lot, as he found it, appears in his journal for 1856: "God could not be unkind to me if he should try. I have never got over my surprise that I should have been born into the most estimable place in all the world, and in the very nick of time too."

birds, microscope, jack-knife and twine. He wore a straw hat, stout shoes, strong gray trousers, to brave scrub-oaks and smilax, and to climb a tree for a hawk's or a squirrel's nest. He waded into the pool for the water-plants, and his strong legs were no insignificant part of his armor. On the day I speak of he looked for the *Menyanthes*, detected it across the wide pool, and, on examination of the florets, decided that it had been in flower five days. He drew out of his breast-pocket his diary, and read the names of all the plants that should bloom on this day, whereof he kept account as a banker when his notes fall due. The *Cypripedium* not due till to-morrow. He thought that, if waked up from a trance, in this swamp, he could tell by the plants what time of the year it was within two days.¹⁶ The redstart was

¹⁶ This passage brings up the lines in "May-Day " beginning—

Ah! well I mind the calendar,
Faithful through a thousand years,
Of the painted race of flowers.

The quotation in the following sentence is from a verse in George Herbert's poem "Vertue," beginning—

"Sweet rose, whose hue, angrie and brave,
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye."

Mr. Emerson had such delight in his occasional walks with Thoreau as guide to the *penetralia* of Concord woods, and had such respect for his mind, that he wished that he and his literary and cosmopolitan friends in Boston should know one another, but Thoreau could not be lured to the city. In a lecture on Clubs this wish found voice:—

"Here is a man who has seen Balaclava, the clubs of Paris, was presented at St. James's, has seen the wreckers at Florida, knows the wrath of Kansas and Montana. And here, on the other side, is my friend who knows nothing and nobody out of his parish. He is the pride of his maiden aunt, and knows muskrats and willows; never went to New York but once in his life. But if the other was a cosmorama, and had seen more than his share, my friend's eyes are microscopes, have seen down into that infinite world which stretches away into the invisible; and he had the advantage that the spot of

flying about, and presently the fine grosbeaks, whose brilliant scarlet “makes the rash gazer wipe his eye,” and whose fine clear note Thoreau compared to that of a tanager which has got rid of its hoarseness. Presently he heard a note which he called that of the night-warbler, a bird he had never identified, had been in search of twelve years, which always, when he saw it, was in the act of diving down into a tree or bush, and which it was vain to seek; the only bird which sings indifferently by night and by day. I told him he must be ware of finding and booking it, lest life should have nothing more to show him. He said, “What you seek in vain for, half your life, one day you come full upon, all the family at dinner. You seek it like a dream, and as soon as you find it you become its prey.”

His interest in the flower or the bird lay very deep in his mind, was connected with Nature,—and the meaning of Nature was never attempted to be defined by him. He would not offer a memoir of his observations to the Natural History Society. “Why should I? To detach the description from its connections in my mind would make it no longer true or valuable to me: and they do not wish what belongs to it.” His power of observation seemed to indicate additional senses. He saw as with microscope, heard as with ear-trumpet, and his memory was a photographic register of all he saw and heard. And yet none knew better than he that it is not the fact that imports, but the impression or effect of the fact on your mind. Every fact lay in glory in his mind, a type of the order and beauty of the whole.

ground on which he stood was sweeter to him than the whole world beside. Now we cannot spare either, but must have both.”

His determination on Natural History was organic. He confessed that he sometimes felt like a hound or a panther, and, if born among Indians, would have been a fell hunter. But, restrained by his Massachusetts culture, he played out the game in this mild form of botany and ichthyology. His intimacy with animals suggested what Thomas Fuller records of Butler the apiologist, that “either he had told the bees things or the bees had told him.” Snakes coiled round his legs; the fishes swam into his hand, and he took them out of the water; he pulled the woodchuck out of its hole by the tail, and took the foxes under his protection from the hunters. Our naturalist had perfect magnanimity; he had no secrets: he would carry you to the heron’s haunt, or even to his most prized botanical swamp,—possibly knowing that you could never find it again, yet willing to take his risks.

No college ever offered him a diploma, or a professor’s chair; no academy made him its corresponding secretary, its discoverer or even its member. Perhaps these learned bodies feared the satire of his presence. Yet so much knowledge of Nature’s secret and genius few others possessed; none in a more large and religious synthesis. For not a particle of respect had he to the opinions of any man or body of men, but homage solely to the truth itself; and as he discovered everywhere among doctors some leaning of courtesy, it discredited them. He grew to be revered and admired by his townsmen, who had at first known him only as an oddity. The farmers who employed him as a surveyor soon discovered his rare accuracy and skill, his knowledge of their lands, of trees, of birds, of Indian remains and the like, which enabled him to tell every farmer more than he knew before of his own farm; so that he began to feel a little as if Mr.

Thoreau had better rights in his land than he. They felt, too, the superiority of character which addressed all men with a native authority.

Indian relics abound in Concord,—arrow-heads, stone chisels, pestles and fragments of pottery; and on the river-bank, large heaps of clam-shells and ashes mark spots which the savages frequented. These, and every circumstance touching the Indian, were important in his eyes.¹⁷ His visits to Maine were chiefly for love of the Indian. He had the satisfaction of seeing the manufacture of the bark canoe, as well as of trying his hand in its management on the rapids. He was inquisitive about the making of the stone arrow-head, and in his last days charged a youth setting out for the Rocky Mountains to find an Indian who could tell him that: “ It was well worth a visit to California to learn it.” Occasionally, a small party of Penobscot Indians would visit Concord, and pitch their tents for a few weeks in summer on the riverbank. He failed not to make acquaintance with the best of them; though he well knew that asking questions of Indians is like catechizing beavers and rabbits. In his last visit to Maine he had great satisfaction from Joseph Polis, an intelligent Indian of Oldtown, who was his guide for some weeks.

He was equally interested in every natural fact. The depth of his perception found likeness of law throughout Nature, and I know not any genius who so swiftly inferred universal law from the single fact. He was no pedant of a department. His eye was open to beauty, and his ear to

¹⁷ A field will yield several crops at once and divide them among owners and trespassers. Emerson, in his “Apology,” tells of the crop which he took off his neighbor’s field without his missing it, and Thoreau strolling over a Staten Islander’s field said, “I took my toll out of the soil in the way of arrow-heads, which may, after all, be the surest crop.”

music. He found these, not in rare conditions, but wheresoever he went. He thought the best of music was in single strains; and he found poetic suggestion in the humming of the telegraph-wire.¹⁸

His poetry might be bad or good; he no doubt wanted a lyric facility and technical skill, but he had the source of poetry in his spiritual perception. He was a good reader and critic, and his judgment on poetry was to the ground of it. He could not be deceived as to the presence or absence of the poetic element in any composition, and his thirst for this made him negligent and perhaps scornful of superficial graces. He would pass by many delicate rhythms, but he would have detected every live stanza or line in a volume and knew very well where to find an equal poetic charm in prose. He was so enamoured of the spiritual beauty that he held all actual written poems in very light esteem in the comparison. He admired Æschylus and Pindar; but when some one was commending them, he said that Æschylus and the Greeks, in describing Apollo and Orpheus, had given no song, or no good one. "They ought not to have moved trees, but to have chanted to the gods such a hymn as would have sung all their old ideas out of their heads, and new ones in." His own verses are often rude and defective. The gold does not yet run pure, is drossy and crude. The thyme and marjoram are not yet honey. But if he

¹⁸ The charity with which Thoreau regarded the railroad and the telegraph when they invaded his shrines in the woods is remarkable. More than that, one of his most remarkable poems, though in prose, is the passage about the telegraph and its wild harping, given by Mr. Channing in his *Thoreau the Poet-Naturalist*.*

*Pages 188, 189. Published by Roberts Brothers, Boston, 1893.

In the extracts from Thoreau's diary, in the volume *Winter*, are many passages on the "Telegraph Harp," but none so fine as the one referred to.

want lyric fineness and technical merits, if he have not the poetic temperament, he never lacks the causal thought, showing that his genius was better than his talent. He knew the worth of the Imagination for the uplifting and consolation of human life, and liked to throw every thought into a symbol.¹⁹ The fact you tell is of no value, but only the impression. For this reason his presence was poetic, always piqued the curiosity to know more deeply the secrets of his mind. He had many reserves, an unwillingness to exhibit to profane eyes what was still sacred in his own, and knew well how to throw a poetic veil over his experience. All readers of Walden will remember his mythical record of his disappointments:—

“I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse and a turtle-dove, and am still on their trail. Many are the travellers I have spoken concerning them, describing their tracks, and what calls they answered to. I have met one or two who have heard the hound, and the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud; and they seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves.”

¹⁹ This reference to Thoreau is from Mr. Emerson’s journal, about 1850:—

“Nothing so marks a man as bold imaginative expressions. A complete statement in the imaginative form of an important truth arrests attention, and is repeated and remembered. A phrase or two of that kind will make the reputation of a man. Pythagoras’s golden sayings were such, and Socrates’s and Mirabeau’s and Bonaparte’s; and I shall not make a sudden descent if I say that Henry Thoreau promised to make as good sentences in that kind as any American.”

Mr. Charles J. Woodbury tells, in his *Talks with Emerson*, of this word which he had from him upon style. After speaking of some of the American historians, he said, Their style slays. Neither of them lifts himself off his feet. They have no lilt in them. You noticed the marble we have just seen? You remember that marble is nothing but crystallized limestone? Well, some writers never get out of the limestone condition. Be airy. . . . Walk upon the ground, but not to sink. It is a fine power, this. Some men have it, prominently the French. How it manifests itself in Montaigne . . . and in Urquhart’s Rabelais! Grimm almost alone of the Germans has it; Borrow had it; Thoreau had it.”

His riddles were worth the reading, and I confide that if at any time I do not understand the expression, it is yet just. Such was the wealth of his truth that it was not worth his while to use words in vain. His poem entitled "Sympathy" reveals the tenderness under that triple steel of stoicism, and the intellectual subtlety it could animate. His classic poem on "Smoke" suggests Simonides, but is better than any poem of Simonides. His biography is in his verses.

His habitual thought makes all his poetry a hymn to the Cause of causes, the Spirit which vivifies and controls his own:—

"I hearing get, who had but ears,
And sight, who had but eyes before;
I moments live, who lived but years,
And truth discern, who knew but learning's lore."

And still more in these religious lines:—

"Now chiefly is my natal hour,
And only now my prime of life;
I will not doubt the love untold,
Which not my worth nor want have bought,
Which wooed me young, and woos me old,
And to this evening hath me brought."²⁰

²⁰ The lines quoted here are all from the poem "Inspiration."

Journal, 1839. "August I. Last night came to me a beautiful poem from Henry Thoreau, Sympathy, the purest strain and the loftiest, I think, that has yet pealed from

Whilst he used in his writings a certain petulance of remark in reference to churches or churchmen, he was a person of a rare, tender and absolute religion, a person incapable of any profanation, by act or by thought. Of course, the same isolation which belonged to his original thinking and living detached him from the social religious forms. This is neither to be censured nor regretted. Aristotle long ago explained it, when he said, "One who surpasses his fellow citizens in virtue is no longer a part of the city. Their law is not for him, since he is a law to himself."

Thoreau was sincerity itself, and might fortify the convictions of prophets in the ethical laws by his holy living. It was an affirmative experience which refused to be set aside. A truth-speaker he, capable of the most deep and strict conversation; a physician to the wounds of any soul; a friend, knowing not only the secret of friendship, but almost worshipped by those few persons who resorted to him as their confessor and prophet, and knew the deep value of his mind and great heart. He thought that without religion or devotion of some kind nothing great was ever accomplished: and he thought that the bigoted sectarian had better bear this in mind.

His virtues, of course, sometimes ran into extremes. It was easy to trace to the inexorable demand on all for exact truth that austerity which made this willing hermit more solitary even than he wished. Himself of a perfect probity, he required not less of others. He had a disgust at crime, and no worldly success would cover it. He detected paltering as readily in

this unpoetic American forest. I hear his verses with as much triumph as I point to my Guido when they praise half poets and half painters. "

dignified and prosperous persons as in beggars, and with equal scorn. Such dangerous frankness was in his dealing that his admirers called him “that terrible Thoreau,” as if he spoke when silent, and was still present when he had departed. I think the severity of his ideal interfered to deprive him of a healthy sufficiency of human society.²¹

The habit of a realist to find things the reverse of their appearance inclined him to put every statement in a paradox. A certain habit of antagonism defaced his earlier writings,—a trick of rhetoric not quite outgrown in his later, of substituting for the obvious word and thought its diametrical opposite. He praised wild mountains and winter forests for their domestic air, in snow and ice he would find sultriness, and commended the wilderness for resembling Rome and Paris. “It was so dry, that you might call it wet.”

The tendency to magnify the moment, to read all the laws of Nature in the one object or one combination under your eye, is of course comic to those who do not share the philosopher’s perception of identity. To him there was no such thing as size. The pond was a small ocean; the Atlantic, a large Walden Pond. He referred every minute fact to cosmical laws. Though he meant to be just, he seemed haunted by a certain chronic assumption that the science of the day pretended completeness, and he

²¹ In his journal Thoreau wrote:—

“It steads us to be as true to children and boors as God himself. It is the only attitude which will suit all occasions; it only will make the earth yield her increase, and by it do we effectually expostulate with the wind.” He speaks of “the charm of Nature’s demeanor toward us,—strict conscientiousness and disregard of us when we have ceased to regard ourselves. So she can never offend us. How true she is, and never swerves.”

The “terrible Thoreau” appears in his essay called “Life without Principle,” in the collection entitled *Miscellanies*.

had just found out that the *savans* had neglected to discriminate a particular botanical variety, had failed to describe the seeds or count the sepals. "That is to say," we replied, "the blockheads were not born in Concord; but who said they were? It was their unspeakable misfortune to be born in London, or Paris, or Rome; but, poor fellows, they did what they could, considering that they never saw Bateman's Pond, or Nine-Acre Corner, or Becky Stow's Swamp; besides, what were you sent into the world for, but to add this observation?"

Had his genius been only contemplative, he had been fitted to his life, but with his energy and practical ability he seemed born for great enterprise and for command; and I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry-party. Pounding beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of these days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans!²²

²² It seems to the editor that this was but the expression of a mood. Thoreau's skill, exactness and remarkable powers, all backed by character, made his friend long to watch him with pride achieve something in those fields for which he recognized his own unfitness. This passage was written before Thoreau's death. His life had not yet the benefit of perspective, nor had his influence on thought and life and taste of multitudes here and abroad appeared. As has been already said, and this sketch shows, the friends could not always thrive in conversation, and Mr. Emerson had not then had opportunity to read much in the journals. Later he read in them with increasing delight and surprise, and approached his friend through them as never before. He would not then have written, as he did in his journal of 1848:—

" Henry Thoreau is like the wood-god who solicits the wandering poet and draws him into 'antres vast and deserts idle,' and bereaves him of his memory, and leaves him naked, plaiting vines and with twigs in his hand. Very seductive are the first steps from the town to the woods, but the end is want and madness."

But the dose of Nature that sufficed for Emerson was not enough for Thoreau.

But these foibles, real or apparent, were fast vanishing in the incessant growth of a spirit so robust and wise, and which effaced its defeats with new triumphs. His study of Nature was a perpetual ornament to him, and inspired his friends with curiosity to see the world through his eyes, and to hear his adventures. They possessed every kind of interest.

He had many elegancies of his own, whilst he scoffed at conventional elegance. Thus, he could not bear to hear the sound of his own steps, the grit of gravel; and therefore never willingly walked in the road, but in the grass, on mountains and in woods. His senses were acute, and he remarked that by night every dwelling-house gives out bad air, like a slaughter-house. He liked the pure fragrance of melilot. He honored certain plants with special regard, and, over all, the pond-lily,—then, the gentian, and the *Mikania scandens*[^] and “life-everlasting,” and a bass-tree which he visited every year when it bloomed, in the middle of July. He thought the scent a more oracular inquisition than the sight,—more oracular and trustworthy. The scent, of course, reveals what is concealed from the other senses. By it he detected earthiness. He delighted in echoes, and said they were almost the only kind of kindred voices that he heard. He loved Nature so well, was so happy in her solitude, that he became very jealous of cities and the sad work which their refinements and artifices made with man and his dwelling.²³ The axe was always destroying his forest. “Thank God,” he said, “they cannot cut down the

²³ Readers of Thoreau will not forget the passage in which he tells of his visits in the Walden cabin in the long winter evenings, from “the original proprietor who is reported to have dug Walden Pond,” and his neighbor there, the “elderly dame, invisible to most persons, in whose odorous herb-garden I love to stroll.”

clouds!" "All kinds of figures are drawn on the blue ground with this fibrous white paint."

I subjoin a few sentences taken from his unpublished manuscripts, not only as records of his thought and feeling, but for their power of description and literary excellence:—

"Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk."

"The chub is a soft fish, and tastes like boiled brown paper salted."

"The youth gets together his materials to build a bridge to the moon, or, perchance, a palace or temple on the earth, and, at length the middle-aged man concludes to build a wood-shed with them."

"The locust z-ing."

"Devil's-needles zigzagging along the Nut-Meadow brook."

"Sugar is not so sweet to the palate as sound to the healthy ear."

"I put on some hemlock-boughs, and the rich salt crackling of their leaves was like mustard to the ear, the crackling of uncountable regiments. Dead trees love the fire."

"The bluebird carries the sky on his back."

"The tanager flies through the green foliage as if it would ignite the leaves."

"If I wish for a horse-hair for my compass-sight I must go to the stable; but the hair-bird, with her sharp eyes, goes to the road."

"Immortal water, alive even to the superficies."

"Fire is the most tolerable third party."

"Nature made ferns for pure leaves, to show what she could do in that line."

“No tree has so fair a bole and so handsome an instep as the beech.”

“How did these beautiful rainbow-tints get into the shell of the fresh-water clam, buried in the mud at the bottom of our dark river?”

“Hard are the times when the infant’s shoes are second-foot.”

“We are strictly confined to our men to whom we give liberty.”

“Nothing is so much to be feared as fear. Atheism may comparatively be popular with God himself.”

“Of what significance the things you can forget? A little thought is sexton to all the world.”

“How can we expect a harvest of thought who have not had a seed-time of character?”

“Only he can be trusted with gifts who can present a face of bronze to expectations.”

“I ask to be melted. You can only ask of the metals that they be tender to the fire that melts them. To nought else can they be tender.”

There is a flower known to botanists, one of the same genus with our summer plant called “Life-Everlasting,” a *Gnaphalium* like that, which grows on the most inaccessible cliffs of the Tyrolese mountains, where the chamois dare hardly venture, and which the hunter, tempted by its beauty, and by his love (for it is immensely valued by the Swiss maidens), climbs the cliffs to gather, and is sometimes found dead at the foot, with the flower in his hand. It is called by botanists the *Gnaphalium leontopodium*, but by the Swiss *Edelweisse*, which signifies *Noble Purity*. Thoreau seemed to me living in the hope to gather this plant, which belonged to him of right. The scale on which his studies proceeded was so large as to require

longevity, and we were the less prepared for his sudden disappearance. The country knows not yet, or in the least part, how great a son it has lost. It seems an injury that he should leave in the midst his broken task which none else can finish, a kind of indignity to so noble a soul that he should depart out of Nature before yet he has been really shown to his peers for what he is. But he, at least, is content. His soul was made for the noblest society; he had in a short life exhausted the capabilities of this world; wherever there is knowledge, wherever there is virtue, wherever there is beauty, he will find a home.²⁴

²⁴ I find this undated sentence among notes relative to Thoreau and so marked:—

“The man of men, the only man you have seen (if you have seen one) is he who is immovably centred.”

This scrap also from the journal of 1852:—

“Henry T. rightly said the other evening, talking of lightning-rods, that the only rod of safety was in the vertebræ of his own spine.”

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- A Note on the Text: from Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* with a Biographical Introduction and Notes by Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-1921) vol. X, pp. 449-485
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