



Life, Literature and Education.

[Contributions on all subjects of popular interest are always welcome in this Department.]

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES.

Thoreau.

The wholly conventional life is, no doubt, the easiest life. If you do the ordinary things which other folk do, farm, keep store, or go into any of the trades or professions, stepping neither greatly to the right nor to the left from the path which all other farmers, or storekeepers, or tradesmen, or professional men, have kept, you may jog on placidly, respected to the end of your days. Let you mind be ever so little of the unconventional type, however, be you ever so little inclined to step away from the multitude, live your own life, carry out your own ideas, regardless of what the masses have done, and you dare your fate. You become the cynosure of all eyes. You snap the thread of sympathy. People watch you curiously, smile, shrug their shoulders at you, look upon you as a new species of genus homo—a freak—and are only willing to take you back into the swim of things when you have won success.

In very truth, it takes a strong man to be unconventional, and the band of those who have dared to be so has been small. And yet who can say that, in the face of all, the life of the daring few has been unhappy? There is a satisfaction in living one's own life; to some temperaments there is a galling slavery in bowing to the common yoke of things as they are. There may be, too, a stimulus in living ahead of one's day, a consciousness of being able to show some example, to teach some lesson whose truth may come home when the teacher has long passed away—for the highest type of man may not live for himself alone. Yet, recognition is sweet to all, and the pity of it would seem to be that so often it comes so late.

Among men of the unconventional class, for whom fame has waited long, was David Henry Thoreau, Emerson's "queer hired man," the one-time "idler," dreamer of idle dreams, the Indian-like wanderer of the swamps, who "would never amount to anything." His works are to-day in almost every well-chosen library, and whose fame, after nearly seventy years, continually increases.

Thoreau was born at Concord, Mass., on the 12th of July, 1817, the youngest son of a pencil-maker of that village, whose father, in turn, a Jersey Islander, of Norman-French extraction, had come to New England in 1773.

Here the lad grew up, showing early in life the traits of reticence and introspection, and the passion for rambling about out of doors, which were always so characteristic of him. Even when a small lad of ten years of age, he spent every spare moment, it is said, quite alone among the woods or meadows, or floating in a punt down the sluggish

waters of the Musketauit, or those of the more swiftly-flowing Assabet.

This ruling passion for wild nature, which dominated him all his life to an extent which made him ever prefer the bleakest swamp to the most elaborate garden, has been attributed to a possible strain of Scandinavian blood in his ancestry—"The gray wolf," as Burroughs has described it, "that stalks through his ancestral folklore." He himself has, seemingly, been pleased with the suggestion. "Perhaps I am descended," he said, "from the Northman named 'Thor-er, the Dog-footed.'" . . . However that may be, Nature was to him, perhaps more than to any other man save David Jeffries, an intimate, and so close to Her was he that, as Emerson has remarked, he seemed to have additional senses: "He saw as with a microscope, heard as with an ear-trumpet, and his memory was a photographic register of all he saw and heard."

Neither at the public school nor at Harvard University does Thoreau appear to have distinguished himself by unusual proficiency in ordinary studies. Perhaps even then the rebellion against conventionality, cut-and-dried "courses," excessive system, was stirring in him to an extent that prevented that enthusiasm in his general work which he might otherwise have attained. . . . Nor was he at any time a favorite with either teachers or students. He was too reserved, apparently too cold. At the public school he was nicknamed "the judge"; at the university he was left pretty much to himself. His loosely-fitting clothes, Indian manners, and stern reserve, did not recommend him to the gay bands of young men who liked to play pranks and indulge in champagne suppers; nor would he have cared for their company. Moreover, he was compelled to be economical, for it was a sore strain on the finances of the family at Concord to send this son to College. . . . In one person, however, he seems to have excited interest—Emerson, the Concord philosopher, to whose influence was due the fact that he received some assistance from the beneficiary funds of the College.

But although Thoreau made no brilliant record on the examinations at Harvard, he was by no means idle. He occupied himself strenuously at what, perhaps, seemed to him to count for more, his walks, his observations, his burrowings in the realms of old English literature; and when he left College he was able to say that he had learned "to express himself," an acquirement whose value he was to prove ere many months had passed.

Upon his graduation, at the age of twenty, he engaged for two or more years in teaching, but found the work thoroughly uncongenial. "As I did not teach for the good of my fellow men," he says, "but simply for a livelihood, this was a failure." It is interesting to note, however, as an instance of his independence, that his final severance from the school was due to the persistence with which he refused to carry out the instructions of the School Board in regard to flogging, an operation with which he refused to have anything to do.

Thenceforth, to the end of his days, he gave himself up to his own "business," and became the naturalist-poet-philosopher, whose life and thought were one day to challenge the attention of the thinking world.

HIS NEW "WORK."

The first thing to be considered was, however, how to make a living, and the way to this he found in surveying and pencil-making, dabbling in the one or the other just long enough to insure the necessities of life, and permit him to be again about his "work."

Little wonder, surely, that the people who knew him but casually were wont to scoff at such "work," and at its master, deeming him a queer fellow. Strange work this, this tramping about fields and woods, for the most part alone, for four hours each day; this writing in notebooks placed on logs and top rails, of the tame occurrences of a Massachusetts swamp; this expanding of such notes into a voluminous journal by the light of the evening dip. And, truly, a strange man this, who often avoided his fellow men; who never stopped to gossip in the village inn; who cared nothing at all for his personal appearance, nor for any "comfort" or luxury, save books, that money could buy; and who was so brutally honest that he would tell you the truth at all costs, even of your friendship. A strange, cold man this, not made of ordinary flesh and blood—and yet—the children all loved him. He was their captain on many a huckleberry trip, their very own Thoreau, who could tell such marvellous stories about all the out-of-door things, who could glorify the world. . . . And yet, too, even early in his career he wrote, "I would fain communicate the wealth of my life to men."

It must not be thought, however, that Thoreau kept himself aloof from all his kind save the children. In his home he was an affectionate son and brother; and he loved to talk at times with some of the honest farmers, fishers and oystermen of the vicinity—with anyone, indeed, who was sincere. "He relished strong, acrid characters," Ellery Channing has said. And before long he was to come into closer touch with the most individual coterie of thinkers that the United States has ever known.

THE NEW ELEMENT.

This new element, which had of late drifted into Concord and its vicinity, was, in short, about to pave the way for Thoreau's public "expression of himself." In 1835 Emerson had come to live near the village, and close upon him, drawn as by a magnet, came permanently, or as frequent visitors, Ripley, Theodore Parker, Olcott, Hawthorne, Lowell, Margaret Fuller, and many others, among them Ellery Channing, the brilliant but indolent, who became Thoreau's best friend.

Presently the "Dial," a quarterly review, was started as the mouth-piece of the circle, and in it Thoreau found his first place in print, notwithstanding the fact that several of his essays, which now hold a place in his books, were rejected by Margaret Fuller, with a sharp criticism of what she considered their faults.

In the meantime, however, Emerson, who was also interested in the Dial, was so impressed with the young philosopher that, in 1841, he invited him to become an inmate of his house, where he was to have his board for what labor he chose to do, and have sufficient time for his own occupations.

During the two years which followed, this arrangement seems to have been perfectly satisfactory. To the end of his life Thoreau retained the warmest regard for the Emerson family, while Emerson was by no means niggardly in his praise of his "wonderful hired man." "Thoreau is a scholar and a poet," he wrote, "and as full of promise as a young apple tree"; and, again, "He is thus far a great benefactor and physician to me." In a letter to Carlyle, he said, "One reader and friend of yours dwells now in my house, Henry Thoreau, a poet whom you may one day be proud of."

But Thoreau's poetry was to be prose-poetry—poetry of thought. He was never felicitous in his attempts at measured verse.

CHARACTERISTICS AS A YOUTH.

This constant intercourse with Emerson doubtlessly had some influence over Thoreau. Indeed, he is said to have grown like him even in voice and mannerisms; yet he never lost an iota of his own peculiar personality. "He was not an imitator of any mortal," wrote Moncure Conway.

Of his personal appearance at this time, in the zenith of his youth, we are given several versions. He was short and straight, and of tremendous vitality, although naturally of weak constitution. Of his face, Hawthorne wrote, "He is as ugly as sin, long-nosed, queer-mouthed, and with uncouth and somewhat rustic though courteous manners, corresponding very well with such an exterior. But his ugliness is of an honest and agreeable fashion, and becomes him much better than beauty." . . . Others, on the contrary, have spoken of his face as scholarlike and thoughtful, even delicately refined, though strong in outline.

Of his strange power over wild animals and birds, which seldom hesitated to come close to him, many have spoken. "Nature, in return for his love," wrote Hawthorne, "seems to adopt him as her especial child, and shows him secrets which few others are allowed to witness. He is familiar with beast, fish, fowl, and reptile, and has strange stories to tell of adventures and friendly passages with these lower brethren of mortality. . . . Strange to say, he seldom walks over a plowed field without picking up an arrow-point, spear-head or other relic of the red man, as if their spirits willed him to be the inheritor of their simple wealth." . . . Incidentally, it may be mentioned that Thoreau is thought to have been the suggestion of the mystic Donatello in Hawthorne's novel, "Transformation."

At this period, also, the ideas of the Transcendentalists ran rife in Massachusetts, and in so far as they advocated simplicity in living, and the doctrine that everyone should labor a part of each day with his