from **Huckleberries**

I served my apprenticeship and have since done considerable journeywork in the huckleberry field. Though I never paid for my schooling and clothing in that way, it was some of the best schooling that I got and paid for itself. Theodore Parker is not the only New England boy who has got his education by picking huckleberries, though he may not have gone to Harvard thereafter, nor to any school more distant than the huckleberry field. *There* was the university itself where you could learn the everlasting Laws, and Medicine and Theology, not under Story, and Warren, and Ware, but far wiser professors than they. Why such haste to go from the huckleberry field to the College yard?

As in old times they who dwelt on the heath, remote from towns, being backward to adopt the doctrines which prevailed in towns, were called heathen in a bad sense, so I trust that we dwellers in the huckleberry pastures, which are our heathlands, shall be slow to adopt the notions of large towns and cities, though perchance we may be nicknamed huckleberry people. But the worst of it is that the emissaries of the towns come more for our berries than they do for our salvation.

Occasionally, in still summer forenoons, when perhaps a mantua-maker was to be dined, and a huckleberry pudding had been decided on (by the authorities), I a lad of ten was despatched to a neighboring hill alone. My scholastic education could be thus far tampered with, and an excuse might be found. No matter how scarce the berries on the near hills, the exact number necessary for a pudding could surely be collected by eleven o'clock—and all ripe ones too though I turned some round three times to be sure they were not premature. My rule in such cases was never to eat one till my dish was full; for going a-berrying implies more things than eating the berries. They at home got nothing but the pudding, a comparatively heavy affair—but I got the forenoon out of doors—to say nothing about the appetite for the pudding. They got only the plums that were in the pudding, but I got the far sweeter plums that never go into it.

At other times, when I had companions, some of them used to bring such remarkably shaped dishes, that I was often curious to see how the berries disposed of themselves in them. Some brought a coffee-pot to the huckleberry field, and such a vessel possessed this advantage at least, that if a greedy boy had skimmed off a handful or two on his way home, he had only to close the lid and give his vessel a shake to have it full again. I have seen this done all round when the party got as far homeward as the Dutch House. It can probably be done with any vessel that has much side to it.

There was a Young America then, which has become Old America, but its principles and motives are still the same, only applied to other things. Sometimes, just before reaching the spot—every boy rushed to the hill side and hastily selecting a spot—shouted 'I speak for this place,' indicating its bounds, and another 'I speak for that,' and so on—and this was sometimes considered good law for the huckleberry field. At any rate it is a law similar to this by which we have taken possession of the territory of Indians and Mexicans.

I once met with a whole family, father, mother, and children, ravaging a huckleberry field in this wise. They cut up the bushes as they went and beat them over the edge of a bushel basket, till they had it full of berries, ripe and green, leaves, sticks etc., and so they passed along out of my sight like wild men.

I well remember with what a sense of freedom and spirit of adventure I used to take my way across the fields with my pail, some years later, toward some distant hill or swamp, when dismissed for all day, and I would not now exchange such an expansion of all my being for all the learning in the world. Liberation and enlargement—such is the fruit which all culture aims to secure. I suddenly knew more about my books than if I had never ceased studying them. I found myself in a schoolroom where I could not fail to see and hear things worth seeing and hearing—where I could not help getting my lesson—for my lesson came to me. Such experience often repeated, was the chief encouragement to go to the Academy and study a book at last.

But ah we have fallen on evil days! I hear of pickers ordered out of the huckleberry fields, and I see stakes set up with written notices

forbidding any to pick them. Some let their fields or allow so much for the picking. *Sic transit gloria ruris*. I do not mean to blame any, but all—to bewail our fates generally. We are not grateful enough that we have lived a part of our lives before these things occurred. What becomes of the true value of country life—what, if you must go to market for it? It has come to this, that the butcher now brings round our huckleberries in his cart. Why, it is as if the hangman were to perform the marriage ceremony. Such is the inevitable tendency of our civilization, to reduce huckleberries to a level with beef-steaks—that is to blot out four fifths of it, or the going a-huckleberrying, and leave only a pudding, that part which is the fittest accompaniment to a beef-steak. You all know what it is to go a-beef-steaking. It is to knock your old fellow laborer Bright on the head to begin with—or possibly to cut a steak from him running in the Abyssinian fashion and wait for another to grow there. The butcher's item in chalk on the door is now 'Calf's head and huckleberries.'

I suspect that the inhabitants of England and the continent of Europe have thus lost in a measure their natural rights, with the increase of population and monopolies. The wild fruits of the earth disappear before civilization, or only the husks of them are to be found in large markets. The whole country becomes, as it were, a town or beaten common, and almost the only fruits left are a few hips and haws.

What sort of a country is that where the huckleberry fields are private property? When I pass such fields on the highway, my heart sinks within me. I see a blight on the land. Nature is under a veil there. I make haste away from the accursed spot. Nothing could deform her fair face more. I cannot think of it ever after but as the place where fair and palatable berries, are converted into money, where the huckleberry is desecrated.

It is true, we have as good a right to make berries private property, as to make wild grass and trees such—it is not worse than a thousand other practices which custom has sanctioned—but that is the worst of it, for it suggests how bad the rest are, and to what result our civilization and division of labor naturally tend, to make all things venal.

A., a professional huckleberry picker, has hired B.'s field, and, we will suppose, is now gathering the crop, with a patent huckleberry horse rake.

C., a professed cook, is superintending the boiling of a pudding made of some of the berries.

While Professor D.—for whom the pudding is intended, sits in his library writing a book—a work on the *Vaccinieae* of course.

And now the result of this downward course will be seen in that work—which should be the ultimate fruit of the huckleberry field. It will be worthless. It will have none of the spirit of the huckleberry in it, and the reading of it will be a weariness of the flesh.

I believe in a different kind of division of labor—that Professor D. should be encouraged to divide himself freely between his library and the huckleberry field.

What I chiefly regret in this case, is the in effect dog-in-the-manger result; for at the same time that we exclude mankind from gathering berries in our field, we exclude them from gathering health and happiness and inspiration, and a hundred other far finer and nobler fruits than berries, which are found there, but which we have no notion of gathering and shall not gather ourselves, nor ever carry to market, for there is no market for them, but let them rot on the bushes.

We thus strike only one more blow at a simple and wholesome relation to nature. I do not know but this is the excuse of those who have lately taken to swinging bags of beans and ringing dumb bells. As long as the berries are free to all comers they are beautiful, though they may be few and small, but tell me that this is a blueberry swamp which somebody has hired, and I shall not want even to look at it. We so commit the berries to the wrong hands, that is to the hands of those who cannot appreciate them. This is proved by the fact that if we do not pay them some money, these parties will at once cease to pick them. They have no other interest in berries but a pecuniary one. Such is the constitution of our society that we make a compromise and permit the berries to be degraded, to be enslaved, as it were.

Accordingly in laying claim for the first time to the spontaneous fruit of our pastures, we are inevitably aware of a little meanness, and the merry berry party which we turn away naturally looks down on and despises us. If it were left to the berries to say who should have them, is it not likely that they would prefer to be gathered by the party

of children in the hay-rigging, who have come to have a good time merely?

This is one of the taxes which we pay for having a rail-road. All our improvements, so called, tend to convert the country into the town. But I do not see clearly that these successive losses are ever quite made up to us. This suggests, as I have said, what origin and foundation many of our institutions have. I do not say this by way of complaining of this custom in particular, which is beginning to prevail—not that I love Caesar less but Rome more. It is my own way of living that I complain of as well as yours—and therefore I trust that my remarks will come home to you. I hope that I am not so poor a shot, like most clergymen, as to fire into a crowd of a thousand men without hitting somebody—though I do not aim at any one.

Thus we behave like oxen in a flower garden. The true fruit of Nature can only be plucked with a fluttering heart and a delicate hand, not bribed by any earthly reward. No hired man can help us to gather that crop.

Among the Indians, the earth and its productions generally were common and free to all the tribe, like the air and water—but among us who have supplanted the Indians, the public retain only a small yard or common in the middle of the village, with perhaps a grave-yard beside it, and the right of way, by sufferance, by a particular narrow route, which is annually becoming narrower, from one such yard to another. I doubt if you can ride out five miles in any direction without coming to where some individual is tolling in the road—and he expects the time when it will all revert to him or his heirs. This is the way we civilized men have arranged it.

I am not overflowing with respect and gratitude to the fathers who thus laid out our New England villages, whatever precedent they were influenced by, for I think that a 'prentice hand liberated from Old English prejudices could have done much better in this new world. If they were in earnest seeking thus far away 'freedom to worship God,' as some assure us—why did they not secure a little more of it, when it was so cheap and they were about it? At the same time that they built meeting-houses why did they not preserve from desecration and destruction far grander temples not made with hands?

What are the natural features which make a township handsome—and worth going far to dwell in? A river with its waterfalls—meadows, lakes—hills, cliffs or individual rocks, a forest and single ancient trees—such things are beautiful. They have a high use which dollars and cents never represent. If the inhabitants of a town were wise they would seek to preserve these things though at a considerable expense. For such things educate far more than any hired teachers or preachers, or any at present recognized system of school education.

I do not think him fit to be the founder of a state or even of a town who does not foresee the use of these things, but legislates as it were, for oxen chiefly.

It would be worth the while if in each town there were a committee appointed, to see that the beauty of the town received no detriment. If here is the largest boulder in the country, then it should not belong to an individual nor be made into door-steps. In some countries precious metals belong to the crown—so here more precious objects of great natural beauty should belong to the public.

Let us try to keep the new world new, and while we make a wary use of the city, preserve as far as possible the advantages of living in the country.

I think of no natural feature which is a greater ornament and treasure to this town than the river. It is one of the things which determine whether a man will live here or in another place, and it is one of the first objects which we show to a stranger. In this respect we enjoy a great advantage over those neighboring towns which have no river. Yet the town, as a corporation, has never turned any but the most purely utilitarian eyes upon it—and has done nothing to preserve its natural beauty.

They who laid out the town should have made the river available as a common possession forever. The town collectively should at least have done as much as an individual of taste who owns an equal area commonly does in England. Indeed I think that not only the channel but one or both banks of every river should be a public highway—for a river is not useful merely to float on. In this case, one bank might have been reserved as a public walk and the trees that adorned it have

been protected, and frequent avenues have been provided leading to it from the main street. This would have cost but few acres of land and but little wood, and we should all have been gainers by it. Now it is accessible only at the bridges at points comparatively distant from the town, and there there is not a foot of shore to stand on unless you trespass on somebody's lot—and if you attempt a quiet stroll down the bank—you soon meet with fences built at right angles with the stream and projecting far over the water—where individuals, naturally enough, under the present arrangement—seek to monopolize the shore. At last we shall get our only view of the stream from the meeting house belfry.

As for the trees which fringed the shore within my remembrance—where are they? and where will the remnant of them be after ten years more?

So if there is any central and commanding hill-top, it should be reserved for the public use. Think of a mountain top in the township—even to the Indians a sacred place—only accessible through private grounds. A temple as it were which you cannot enter without trespassing—nay the temple itself private property and standing in a man's cow yard—for such is commonly the case. New Hampshire courts have lately been deciding, as if it was for them to decide, whether the top of Mount Washington belonged to A or B—and it being decided in favor of B, I hear that he went up one winter with the proper officers and took formal possession. That area should be left unappropriated for modesty and reverence's sake—if only to suggest that the traveller who climbs thither in a degree rises above himself, as well as his native valley, and leaves some of his grovelling habits behind.

I know it is a mere figure of speech to talk about temples nowadays, when men recognize none, and associate the word with heathenism. Most men, it appears to me, do not care for Nature, and would sell their share in all her beauty, for as long as they may live, for a stated and not very large sum. Thank God they cannot yet fly and lay waste the sky as well as the earth. We are safe on that side for the present. It is for the very reason that some do not care for these things that we need to combine to protect all from the vandalism of a few.

It is true, we as yet take liberties and go across lots in most directions but we naturally take fewer and fewer liberties every year, as we meet with more resistance, and we shall soon be reduced to the same straights they are in England, where going across lots is out of the question—and we must ask leave to walk in some lady's park.

There are a few hopeful signs. There is the growing *library*—and then the town does set trees along the highways. But does not the broad landscape itself deserve attention?

We cut down the few old oaks which witnessed the transfer of the township from the Indian to the white man, and perchance commence our museum with a cartridge box taken from a British soldier in 1775. How little we insist on truly grand and beautiful natural features. There may be the most beautiful landscapes in the world within a dozen miles of us, for aught we know—for their inhabitants do not value nor perceive them—and so have not made them known to others—but if a grain of gold were picked up there, or a pearl found in a fresh-water clam, the whole state would resound with the news.

Thousands annually seek the White Mountains to be refreshed by their wild and primitive beauty—but when the country was discovered a similar kind of beauty prevailed all over it—and much of this might have been preserved for our present refreshment if a little foresight and taste had been used.

I do not believe that there is a town in this country which realizes in what its true wealth consists.

I visited the town of Boxboro only eight miles west of us last fall—and far the handsomest and most memorable thing which I saw there, was its noble oak wood. I doubt if there is a finer one in Massachusetts. Let it stand fifty years longer and men will make pilgrimages to it from all parts of the country, and for a worthier object than to shoot squirrels in it—and yet I said to myself, Boxboro would be very like the rest of New England, if she were ashamed of that wood-land. Probably, if the history of this town is written, the historian will have omitted to say a word about this forest—the most interesting thing in it—and lay all the stress on the history of the parish.

It turned out that I was not far from right—for not long after I

came across a very brief historical notice of Stow—which then included Boxboro—written by the Reverend John Gardiner in the *Massachusetts Historical Collections*, nearly a hundred years ago. In which Mr. Gardiner, after telling us who was his predecessor in the ministry, and when he himself was settled, goes on to say, 'As for any remarkables, I am of mind there have been the fewest of any town of our standing in the Province. . . . I can't call to mind above one thing worthy of public notice, and that is the grave of Mr. John Green' who, it appears, when in England, 'was made clerk of the exchequer' by Cromwell. 'Whether he was excluded the act of oblivion or not I cannot tell,' says Mr. Gardiner. At any rate he returned to New England and as Gardiner tells us 'lived and died, and lies buried in this place.'

I can assure Mr. Gardiner that he was not excluded from the act of oblivion.

It is true Boxboro was less peculiar for its woods at that date—but they were not less interesting absolutely.

I remember talking a few years ago with a young man who had undertaken to write the history of his native town—a wild and mountainous town far up country, whose very name suggested a hundred things to me, and I almost wished I had the task to do myself—so few of the original settlers had been driven out—and not a single clerk of the exchequer buried in it. But to my chagrin I found that the author was complaining of want of materials, and that the crowning fact of his story was that the town had been the residence of General C— and the family mansion was still standing.

I have since heard, however, that Boxboro is content to have that forest stand, instead of the houses and farms that might supplant it—not because of its beauty—but because the land pays a much larger tax now than it would then.

Nevertheless it is likely to be cut off within a few years for ship-timber and the like. It is too precious to be thus disposed of. I think that it would be wise for the state to purchase and preserve a few such forests.

If the people of Massachusetts are ready to found a professorship of Natural History—so they must see the importance of preserving some portions of nature herself unimpaired.

I find that the rising generation in this town do not know what an oak or a pine is, having seen only inferior specimens. Shall we hire a man to lecture on botany, on oaks for instance, our noblest plants—while we permit others to cut down the few best specimens of these trees that are left? It is like teaching children Latin and Greek while we burn the books printed in those languages.

I think that each town should have a park, or rather a primitive forest, of five hundred or a thousand acres, either in one body or several—where a stick should never be cut for fuel—nor for the navy, nor to make wagons, but stand and decay for higher uses—a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation.

All Walden wood might have been reserved, with Walden in the midst of it, and the Easterbrooks country, an uncultivated area of some four square miles in the north of the town, might have been our huckleberry field. If any owners of these tracts are about to leave the world without natural heirs who need or deserve to be specially remembered, they will do wisely to abandon the possession to all mankind, and not will them to some individual who perhaps has enough already—and so correct the error that was made when the town was laid out. As some give to Harvard College or another Institution, so one might give a forest or a huckleberry field to Concord. This town surely is an institution which deserves to be remembered. Forget the heathen in foreign parts, and remember the pagans and savages here.

We hear of cow commons and ministerial lots, but we want *men* commons and *lay* lots as well. There is meadow and pasture and woodlot for the town's poor, why not a forest and huckleberry field for the town's rich?

We boast of our system of education, but why stop at schoolmasters and schoolhouses? We are all schoolmasters and our schoolhouse is the universe. To attend chiefly to the desk or schoolhouse, while we neglect the scenery in which it is placed, is absurd. If we do not look out we shall find our fine schoolhouse standing in a cow yard at last.

It frequently happens that what the city prides itself on most is its park—those acres which require to be the least altered from their original condition.

Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influences of each. Let these be your only diet-drink and botanical medicines.

In August live on berries, not dried meats and pemmican as if you were on shipboard making your way through a waste ocean, or in the Darien Grounds, and so die of ship-fever and scurvy. Some will die of ship-fever and scurvy in an Illinois prairie, they lead such stifled and scurvy lives.

Be blown on by all the winds. Open all your pores and bathe in all the tides of nature, in all her streams and oceans, at all seasons. Miasma and infection are from within, not without. The invalid brought to the brink of the grave by an unnatural life, instead of imbibing the great influence that nature is—drinks only of the tea made of a particular herb—while he still continues his unnatural life—saves at the spile and wastes at the bung. He does not love nature or his life and so sickens and dies and no doctor can save him.

Grow green with spring—yellow and ripe with autumn. Drink of each season's influence as a vial, a true panacea of all remedies mixed for your especial use. The vials of summer never made a man sick, only those which he had stored in his cellar. Drink the wines not of your own but of nature's bottling—not kept in a goat- or pig-skin, but in the skins of a myriad fair berries.

Let Nature do your bottling, as also your pickling and preserving.

For all nature is doing her best each moment to make us well. She exists for no other end. Do not resist her. With the least inclination to be well we should not be sick. Men have discovered, or think that they have discovered the salutariness of a few wild things only, and not of all nature. Why nature is but another name for health. Some men think that they are not well in Spring or Summer or Autumn or Winter, (if you will excuse the pun) it is only because they are not indeed *well*, that is fairly *in* those seasons.

c. 1861