TWO BROTHERS

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"AT length on Saturday, the last day of August, 1839, we two, brothers, and natives of Concord, weighed anchor in this river port; for Concord, too, lies under the sun, a port of entry and departure for the bodies as well as the souls of men; one shore at least exempted from all duties but such as an honest man will gladly discharge."

One of these brothers, it need scarcely be said, and he who later wrote the above words, was Henry David Thoreau; and the voyage upon which the two were embarking was that of the famous week on the Concord and Merrimack rivers, the most famous voyage, perhaps, ever to be made within the bounds of New England. But in that late summer of 1839 how unpretentious, for all the promised fun and adventure, it must have seemed to the voyagers themselves, and to those other Concord folk who had heard about the excursion! Only a few friends were down at the river to see the boys off; probably no one stopped work, or went much out of his way to bid them good-bye. They were just two brothers off on a summer outing, after a year of teaching school. A very successful school it had been; and when its doors opened again after a few weeks, more children would be seeking entrance than could be accommodated. Two such excellent teachers as the Thoreau brothers in one school made an opportunity not to be overlooked.

Henry had been to college, and might be accounted the smarter in book learning and perhaps in some other respects. But John, two years older and then twenty-four years of age, was clearly the better teacher and the more popular companion. If any man deserved popularity, it was John Thoreau. Sunshine itself was not warmer and freer and more cheering than was his translucent personality. It seemed to be utterly without any of those dark crevices that scar the surface and undermine the depths of most human souls. But John was as unsuspecting of his own goodness as he was of another's evil intent. Everyone loved him, from the old people whom he reminded of their own better days, to the small lads of his school to whom he was something of a benevolent deity. Would any other think to slip a piece of juicy watermelon in a youngster's desk before school so that he might eat it at recess? Wasn't this generosity and kindness a little more than human?

Everyone loved John Thoreau, but no one more than his brother Henry.

The voyage proved to be all that the brothers could have wished. They had plenty of adventure and thrilling exercise and comradeship; whole mornings and afternoons of hard rowing or more leisurely travel, and no less thrilling nights camping out on the river bank, with only a buffalo robe and a tent between them and the stars; new lands to explore, new people to encounter, new thoughts to share and ponder. Best of all, each had in the other his first choice of companion. What more was there to wish? They were not lonely, for they had society enough—such society as by its very richness made the solitude of the vast out-door nights all the deeper as they crept into their tent and pulled the buffalo robe about them. John would drop to sleep before they had talked over half the experiences of the day, leaving Henry awake for many long minutes to turn over in his mind his strangely baffling happiness, while the cries and murmurs of the night-creatures mingled with the sound of breathing at his side. Sometimes, in that semi-solitude of wakefulness, turbid doubts and perplexities swarmed through his mind like a host of nocturnal insects. He would peer into his brother's face, lest it too seem troubled. But John would be sleeping peacefully, and after a time "his cheerful spirit soothed and reassured his brother; for whenever they meet, the Good Genius is sure to prevail." It had always been so from their earliest childhood when they slept together in the trundle-bed, two small boys, one fast asleep, the other awake and open-eyed. Once their mother, finding them thus, had asked Henry why he had not gone to sleep. "Mother", he had said, "I have been looking through the stars to see if I couldn't see God behind them." In his improvised camp somewhere on the bank of the Concord or Merrimack, Henry Thoreau, grown to young manhood, still looked out at the stars and tried to pierce the mystery behind them, while his brother, a cheerful spirit of the day, slept untroubled at his side.

Two weeks later they were back home, and ready for another year of teaching. But the book that Henry was to write about the trip was not published until ten years later. Why did he wait so long? What was to be gained by delay? Would not every year subtract its quota of memories and impressions, and dull the colours of those that remained? What would a week be, even the happiest week in a lifetime, ten years afterwards?

The few people who knew Henry Thoreau well did not ask themselves these questions. They were surprised, not that the book was written so tardily, but that it was written at all. Ten years, they knew, could not impair Henry Thoreau's Indian reten-

tiveness. Memory was clear and lasting. But the pain of memory, was that lasting too? Had ten years been long enough to dull its ache so that the wounded man might press his hand unflinchingly against the wound? For in those ten years, scarcely more than two of them, after the late summer day when the two brothers weighed anchor for the voyage northward, John Thoreau made his final voyage from the port of Concord, which seemed not to lie under the sun that January day. When he died, a part of Henry—perilously near the vital part—died with him. "Where is my heart gone?" he wrote in his journal. "They say men cannot part with it and live." By a horrible irony, John had died in agony. He whose life had been so beautiful was disfigured by death. He who had been his brother's Good Genius had to struggle with a legion of demons before he could die. Henry struggled too, as if he were likewise mortally wounded; and his own body bore the stigmata of his brother's suffering.

When death at last came, something of the silence of the grave passed into Henry. With his brother's body he buried his brother's name. Thenceforth he rarely spoke of him; and when he did, it was by allegory. It might be in the ballad of "Tom Bowling" that he sometimes sang in after years. "Tom Bowling" was to him a pseudonym, and in his heart the song became a requiem and an elegy. In *Walden* he wrote of a bay horse that he had lost, and for which he had searched diligently and made repeated enquiries, all without avail. Did anyone divine the riddle before he revealed it?

But the perfect emblem of John Thoreau was birds,—birds that bring music and colour and gladness, birds that may fly away suddenly and be seen no more. Was it not right to believe that one who had loved birds in his life would be honoured by them in death? Two years before the river trip Henry had written to John, then away from home: "Brother: I write these things because I know that thou lovest the Great Spirit's creatures, and wast wont to sit at thy lodge-door, when the maize was green, to hear the bluebird's song. So shalt thou, in the land of spirits, not only find good hunting-grounds and sharp arrowheads, but much music of birds." Henry signed his name "Tahatawan", and John, his brother sachem, was "Hopeful of Hopewell". Grown-up boys they were, still playing Indian.

The next spring, Henry wrote John again. "The bluebirds made their appearance the 14th day of March; robins and pigeons have also been seen. Mr. Emerson has put up the bluebird box in due form. All send their love." John himself had built this bird-box the preceding summer for his wise and genial neighbour, who never forgot the gift or the giver. Every spring, long after

John had died—even after Henry, too, was dead—the bluebirds built their nest in this box—a living memorial to their benefactor.

Is it any wonder, then, that as long as he lived, Henry Thoreau was the first to greet the birds each year that sang their way north to Concord? It was no mere pastime for him, but a sacred friendship. Bereaved of the brother whom he loved more than anyone else, he became a closer brother to the birds that his brother had loved. His own love for them grew and flowered into loving knowledge. He became a seer, and from every flight of birds he took his secret auspices. For there was ever the wild, mythic hope that some day from the "land of spirits", resonant with much music of birds, a messenger would come from his brother sachem:

> What bird will thou employ
> To bring me word of thee?

Each spring the birds came faithfully and regularly, so regularly that by long practice he could almost foretell the day when each kind would first appear. But they never seemed so happy as they had once been:

> A sadder strain mixed with their song,
> They've slowlier built their nests;
> Since thou art gone,
> Their lively labour rests.

Grief, when it is deep, lies below the surface of words. When it is noble, it towers above the slough of despond. Henry Thoreau was silent, but he did not mope. He hid his grief and disciplined it. This finder of arrowheads and would-be sachem had more of the Indian in him than he knew. His was the Indian's most sacred possession; a deep impenetrable stoicism, which the casual might mistake for obduracy. After the eloquent gap in his journal from January 9 to February 19, 1842 (John died on January 11), Henry wrote often of death, but never of John. Day by day he wrestled with grief—half angel, half devil, that had nearly destroyed his Indian self-reliance. Day by day he cross-examined himself and his fortune, and gradually built up a lasting defence against that fortune's devastations. Why, he asks, should we grieve to lose a friend who has bequeathed to us his essential and immortal goodness? Or why be overwhelmed by this most necessary process of nature that we call death, as if it were some recent and arbitrary invention? Is the loneliness left by death so much harder to bear than the loneliness of uncommunicable thoughts? Is one man wiser than the universe, that his puny will must be obeyed? "I must receive my life as passively as the willow leaf that flutters over the brook". And sorrow—"Thank God for sorrow. It is hard to be abused."

For two months and a half the journal marks the struggle. Then there is a silence of three years. The struggle becomes subterranean, forcing its way through the purifying earth, like the underground stream that flows from muddy Flint's Pond to crystal Walden. Three years, and Walden is reached. The journal reopens on July 5, 1845. "Yesterday I came here to live." Yesterday Henry Thoreau left Concord, lying under the sun, and came to Walden Pond whose waters are liquid sunshine itself. Yesterday—a longer yesterday—he left his youth back in Concord, where that brother of his youth lay buried. Together they had cruised northward to New Hampshire and home again, resting each night somewhere along the river bank, with only a buffalo robe and a tent between them and the stars. Now, as then, John had dropped to sleep before half their talk was over, leaving Henry awake and alone.

Only the boat was left, and it was now no longer his. How could he keep the boat that they had built together, now that they could never share it again? The timber they had planed and fitted might last for ever, but the dreams they had built into it were all gone, and to the remaining brother the boat was no longer seaworthy. Another owned it now, a newcomer to Concord who had, soon after his arrival, secured the boat together with the legacy of happiness that went with it. In the year that John Thoreau died, Nathaniel Hawthorne brought his bride to Concord. Behind the old manse that was their new home, flowed the same quiet river that had once carried two brothers away on a summer outing. Here and there near its bank (but not near enough, except with boat) blossomed fragrant white waterlilies—for whom, if not the bride? Did Thoreau hesitate? The bridegroom was no Indian with a tradition of birchbark canoes behind him. He could not even manage the boat. He was afraid of getting lost in the woods. He was angry with tangles and briars that got in his way. But he wanted to float among the lily-pads, trailing his fingers in the water, and watching the graceful eddies that they made. He wanted the lilies, and he needed the boat. But was he worthy of it? Only if happiness be counted worth—happiness of a kind that Henry Thoreau had never known nor would ever know. There was no time to lose. The month was almost gone. On August 31st, 1842, the transaction was made. The next day the boat was delivered. The last day of August. Thus was one sad anniversary celebrated.

And thus it was that Henry Thoreau did not take his boat to Walden Pond. It was appropriately left behind in Concord, with other possessions of his youth. When on Independence Day, 1845, he commenced his abode in the little house of his own making, he

was a man if there ever was one—mature, tempered, sagacious. Thus he made to the world his own declaration of independence. Thus he took in solitude his vow of poverty, chastity, and sacred disobedience to the tyranny of public opinion. His life work was irrevocably chosen. The forest was to be his noiseless workshop. His life partner was won, and to her he was indissolubly wedded. She, too, was of the forest, the lake, and the sky. He had conquered his grief, and from its dead body sprang the green shoots of a new and greater strength. The heart he had thought lost he found again, throbbing mutely in every tree and grass-blade and merest drop of water, and melodiously in every bird. Challenging grief to rise from the dead and overthrow him if it could, he wrote the story of the happy voyage which he had so long tried to forget, naming resolutely on the first page, to be printed in a thousand volumes, his brother's name:

> Where'er thou sail'st, who sailed with me,
> Though now thou climbest loftier mounts,
> And fairer rivers dost ascend,
> Be thou my Muse, my Brother John.

Was ever brother thus invoked, or more worthily? Was ever other invocation more richly blessed—in a book and in a life? For the Muse that inspired Henry Thoreau's first book was the same Good Genius that had warmed and kindled his life, and would continue to do so while life lasted.

There were warm, quiet evenings at Walden when the surrounding hills were as moveless in the water as they were in the atmosphere, and when the echoes were as clear and lovely as the reflections. At such times Henry Thoreau loved to play his flute from a boat adrift near the centre of the pond, stopping his music now and then, the better to enjoy the music of those other flutes hidden in the hills. His was the same mellow flute that John had used to play, and whose notes, echoing distantly through the village, Henry had thought the finest sounds he had ever heard. It had seemed as if his brother were speaking to him more beautifully and distinctly than by any word of mouth. Now it was Henry who spoke the lovely language. Did anyone hear? A thrush sang from the farther shore, and was answered by one still more distant. Nearby a whippoorwill commenced his melancholy call, and then waited while another deeper in the wood replied. An owl hooted for some ghostly mate. The man with the flute played on, unanswered except for the echoes from the low hills. They were his only answer, and they were but a lovely mockery. Yet who knows how far the sound of the flute travelled, or how high? Who can say that its sweet utterance was not duly heard and understood?