

The Other End of a Shad Dinner

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Quite divergent experiences of life often relate themselves to each other in the most surprising and baffling manner. In this paper, I am simply tieing [sic] together, by strings of imagination, certain experiences and observations that befell Mrs. Davis and myself within the course of three or four months last summer (1916). They are just commonplace incidents, yet as they linked themselves together in our minds, they grew into an interesting story. I give them over to you as the tales of two vacations, associated in historic continuity, by a possible journey of a possible shad from the quiet shores of a Maine river to the marts of a great city. From thence, this travelling shad may have journeyed to the refrigerator of a hotel and then, from the refrigerator to the grid-iron and thence, to the dining room, where he commanded the attention and satisfied the needs of two hungry and adventurous spirits. I do not mean to imply that this particular shad came from that particular spot on the Maine river that I have in mind. All I intend to suggest is, that it might have been. Just on the flimsy thread of that chance possibility, I string my tale of a shad dinner and its supplementary experiences, indicated by the language of the title of this paper, namely:- "The Other End of a Shad Dinner."

Just how we happened to be blowing ourselves to a shad dinner has a bearing upon the tale. We were at the May meetings last spring, a vacation that was calculated to combine pleasure and professional interests in fair proportions. For two days we had been confining ourselves very faithfully to meetings. We had listened to sermons, to reports, to addresses, to discussions. We had heard the problems of the Universe discussed until we had reached the saturation point.

As to whether the functions of the church were that of giving consolation to the saint or that of stimulating the radicals to yet greater radicalism had been discussed with great heat. We had been fed with the description of great missionary opportunities. We had heard intimations of Pacificism. In fact, about every subject and every problem that perplexes the mind of modern man had been touched upon.

As we picked our way out of the artificial light of that architectural atrocity, Tremont Temple, into the fresh air and light of a glorious May afternoon, it seemed like passing from one world to another, like an escape from a prison house of words, arguments and prejudices into a great field of light. "In this refulgent summer it has been a joy to draw the breath of life."¹ Everywhere the endless river of human life, winding its way in and out between the high banks of buildings. A Walt Whitman might have stood there and penned a poem as rich in the sympathy and the glory of human life as his Brooklyn Ferry. Who can read those lines and not feel something of the majesty of human life?

"Crowds of men and women, attired in usual costumes, how curious you are to me,
On the ferry boats, the hundreds and hundreds that cross,
returning home, are more curious than you suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence,
are more to me and more to my meditations than you suppose,
We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also. You furnish your parts towards eternity.
Great or small, you furnish your parts towards the soul."

Just such crowds as Walt Whitman loved, became a part as we wound our way in and out among the whirling automobiles, the heavy truck teams, the scampering news-boys, the noise and the turmoil of the city. Life—pulsating, human life and fresh stimulating air and sunlight. Here we were, right in

¹ First sentence of Ralph Waldo Emerson's July 15, 1838 address before the senior class in Divinity College, Cambridge. Note, Earl C. Davis has replaced Emerson's "luxury" with "joy."

the midst of it, this varied and changing stream of human beings, the subject and the object of all the discussions, the problems, the impassioned words, the fiery argument, the inspiring appeal. Right there, within a hundred yards of the very doorway through which we escaped from the great building, called a temple, into the sunshine and open air, were all the kinds and classes in whose interest that battle of words had been waged. There were the money changers, the laborers, the good citizens, the crafty politician, the reformers, the preachers, the social worker, the outcasts, the publicans and sinners, the pharisees, "Great and small, who furnish that parts towards the soul: the soul of the city, the soul of the nation, the soul of humanity."²

Through the throng we formed our way, across the edge of Boston Common, along whose pathways sat the battered derelicts of the conflict of life, broken, hopeless looking creatures, apparently unaware of any great achievements or any great interests. Over the hill we passed, by the State House, with its golden dome, to the quiet of that haven of refuge from the storm and stress of things, a hotel room. Down we flopped, to forget, for a time, the surging mass of life, problems, types, classes, the wonderful baffling pageant of daily human experience. Into the world of oblivion, that queer underworld of ours that the psychologists call our sub-consciousness, slowly and in quite orderly fashion, retreated this world of word and action. A new mood began to steal over us. Whence it came from, who can tell. We no longer cared for problems or any serious things of life. "Listen to sermons." The very idea was intolerable. We wanted adventure, play, fun; no thinking, no considering, no planning. Just to be and to laugh. Out again we go, into the wilderness of city streets. Somewhere we would find a quiet corner where we could eat and laugh and talk nonsense together and enjoy the passing show of 1916.

We were on the street again, after refreshing ourselves a bit. All was changed. The clear and brilliant daylight had

² Walt Whitman, Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, Section 26

given way to soft evening shades. The strange appearing lights of the city flickered on every side. New people, on pleasure bent, were thronging the streets. The shops were closed, the windows were brilliant in their display of goods for sale, constant reminder of the labors, the necessities and the frivolities of life. Down through the winding streets with their alleys, their by-streets, we wandered. The noises of the night were as marked and as characteristic as those of the day, but how different; nothing of the dull and heavy rumbling of the great trucks drawn by the drayhorse. There were no lumbering auto-vans. Into the night noise of the city, there had crept something of the suggestion of adventure, of lightness, of buoyance, of laughter and music.

Yet, to me, the laughter, the gaiety, the restlessness of the city streets at night, always suggests a lack of richness and depth, that sends my mind traveling to a loved spot in the hills where I hear the sighing of the wind in the hemlocks and the laughter of the brook, winding among the stones. I sometimes fancy that I hear in the music of the White Way of the city, that undertone that Matthew Arnold heard at Dover Beach.

"Listen! You hear the grating roar
Of pebbles, which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in."

We pass one restaurant after another, because, for some strange reason, each one fails to suit the mood of the moment. So hard it is to find a retreat in the city that does not offend, that seems to satisfy. One place is too nouveau, another, too gay, another too stiff. How difficult to satisfy one's moods. The old eating places that revealed individuality and character have vanished. We take what is left. We find ourselves seated in a cozy little stall where we may enjoy as much privacy as a public restaurant affords. A very decent waiter provides us with order books. We settled ourselves to the task of selecting our dinner. Such a task, to one from the small town is not easy. It

involves likes and dislikes, finances, whims and caprice. But through the maze of this complicated problem, we journey laughingly and successful to the point of writing on the order slips, "Broiled shad for two." Accessories make the fringe and we settle back to take in our surroundings, while the good people out somewhere in the unseen corners of the building prepare our feast for us.

What an astonishing institution is the city restaurant! Especially such a one as caters to the folk on evening pleasure bent. What interesting, baffling, curious people are seen there. Here one's eye rests on a group of roistering and frolicking youths, eating and drinking, stimulated to heights of ecstasy, adventurous, irresponsible. At the next table, one sees flashily dressed, conspicuous, self-conscious folks, in the lines of whose face one may find no reassuring evidences of worth or virility. Yonder, one's attention is arrested by the labored effort of a couple to rise by the stimulus of drink and the place, above the pressure of some burden, whose weight is all too apparently registered upon the heavy lines of care, the drawn mouth and the cold eye. Perhaps it is such as these that contribute that undertone of sadness and tragedy to the music of the evening of the city. Others are evidently just listlessly eating and enjoying, in as quiet a way as possible, some unusual change from the daily routine. Again, there are, as on the street corner or crossing Brooklyn Ferry, great and small, good and bad, those who furnish the parts of the soul, of life and humanity. Not even the passionate strains of a Hungarian Orchestra nor the weird sounds of a nasal-voiced singer, can exorcise from this place of pleasure and relaxation, that spirit of discontent that haunts the life of the city.

Our dinner is eaten, our bills properly paid and we go forth again to the street, definitely determined to hear the great orchestra of Boston play the Pop Concerts in Symphony Hall. It is a great sight, that hall filled with people, ranging all the way from the devotee of music, as a social function, to those who listen, in rapt attention, as the hundred pieces under the mastership of the leader, carries the vast throng of people through the emotional

experience that only the cosmopolitan language of music can achieve. Now, we are gay and joyous, anon we are marching with martial step by the side of the soldier as he goes forth to battle, and again, we are quivering with pathos and sorrow, only to give way to feelings of strong triumphant virility, stirring; strengthening and inspiring, full of faith and hope. Again, furnishing our parts towards the soul, the soul of the city, the nation, humanity.

Again, we are in the open, again, we walk along the almost deserted streets, again, the cool, fresh evening air and the stars. Again, our mood is changing. That would be the result in music, if the real soul of the city, its deepest aspirations, its most profound passions, its grandest prayers, its real life, could be translated to us by the hundred men of the orchestra, not as they might see it, but as it really is. Would the result be the quivering of pathos and sorrow, rooted in deep tragedy, or, would it be that strong, virile, triumphant motive of achievement, hope and security?

On this we pondered, the mind flitting from one scene to another and then back again, slowly and yet, more slowly, until all the life of the strange, gay and sad city was buried, for us, at least, in the peaceful oblivion of sleep. And this ended "one end of the shad dinner."

The other end of the shad dinner came to us some time later, when we set forth with the children and as few, goods and effects of this world as we could get along with for a summer on an island in the Kennebec River, some fifteen miles from the mouth of the river and some ten miles above salt water. A ride to Boston on the train, and a night on the boat, brought us at 6:30 to the little town of Richmond, the nearest stopping place to the island, otherwise known as Perkins, the smallest town in the State of Maine. It boasts of between thirty and thirty-five year round inhabitants, eight or ten voters. It is four and one-half miles long and varies from half mile to a mile and one-half in width.³

³ Almost certainly this is the island now known as Swan Island

Hardly had we left the good old side-wheeler, City of Bangor, when the whistle blew and the water began to churn, the erstwhile home for one night on the water moved out into the stream and continued on its way up the river. We found ourselves, with a part of our baggage, on the wharf, waiting our cue for the next move. So far as our information had gone, we were to await conveyance to our summer place. Hardly had we settled ourselves, when a motor boat, the joy and delight of all the boys, came alongside near where the City of Bangor had just been resting. There was no difficulty in the boatman finding us. We were not in a crowd but just two lines of destiny that were crossing, for the first time at the wharf. The boatman proved to be, as we half guessed upon his approach, the very man, upon whose farm, we were to live for the summer; strong, kindly, congenial, not given to talking overmuch, but always alive to what was going on. Whose straightforward eye always looked through an of atmosphere of quizzical humor. He was, by trade, farmer and fisherman. He had followed the sea and when the time came to marry, had settled down upon the old homestead to rear a family and to live. With this much knowledge of the man, you will enter the boat with us, and start a three miles ride around the head of the Island and down the east side to our wharf. From time to time, you will get glimpses of other traits in the character of this man. Two such glimpses came to us on the way down the river. We talked some, and naturally we were watching and measuring each other, for were we not to be the closest of neighbors during the summer? With quite casual conversation about the land on either side of us and other objects of interest, our talk turned at last, to the children. We attempted to forewarn him of their inquisitive nature and finally came to this remark, "Well children never bother me, no matter how much noise they make or how much mischief they get into" ... pause ... "To tell the truth, I don't see much use of living unless there are children growing up to work for." Our eyes opened. It sounded good. We were to learn that he was but speaking the philosophy of his life. But not only did he work for them but with them, not father and master, but father and companion. To anticipate a little, I recall walking up the road, late one afternoon,

and feasting my eyes on the sight of the father walking across the field of view in a distance, accompanied by his daughter, whose arm was thrown up over his shoulder in the most comradely fashion. It was typical and symbolical. But down the river, we were going. And I promised another incident of that trip. We came to a place in the river where a small island divides the river into two streams.

⁴The approach was beautiful, in the early morning light, with everything still wet with dew. At his point came the second remark that struck us, "We will go down the little river. It takes a little longer but there is a very pretty spot that you will like to see." So down little river we went. We saw the spot and, more for us, we saw a man, to whom these casual sights of beauty along the way were worth noting and pointing out and we gained an inkling of a new point of view, so different from the city. So often during the days ahead were we to see it come to the front. It was the point of view that the most important thing in life is to live. We work, not to make money, not to gain power but partly, because we enjoy it and partly, because it is a necessity of living. We work to live.

One other thing we learned on the way down the river that has a bearing on this tale. Just before we arrived at our wharf, we passed a fish weir and were told the interesting fact that it was a part of our new friends direct contact with the productive work of the world. Here at this weir, in the spring months, when the shad bushes are blooming in Berkshire, the fisherman farmer and sons, netted the shad and shipped them to Boston. Nights, when the denizens of the restaurants were eating their shad roe and picking the bones out of the delicious fish, here, on this Maine river, might be found these strong, whole-souled men and boys, pulling nets and gathering the shad into the boat to supply the marts. My mind reverted to the shad dinner, the wandering on the streets, the Symphony Orchestra and I connected and contrasted the two ends of a shad dinner.

We were soon installed in our cottage, minus trunks and all our spare necessities. But soon came the friendly

⁴ This small island is now known as Little Swan

expressions of our new neighbors in the form of a messenger, the daughter of the family, to know if there were not some needs that they might supply until our trunks might arrive, twenty-four hours later. Here I must introduce to you Marcia, a strong, robust girl of thirteen, whose carriage, as she walked, was like that of a stately gentlewoman. She seemed a part of the landscape, one could almost see the invisible roots of experience, growth and relationship that made the place a part of her and her, a part of the place. There was a dignity and free and spontaneous friendliness, yet reserved with the suggestion of unexhausted power, so much in contrast with the nervous, hectic restlessness that one sees so much of in the city. She could ride horseback, help her brothers cultivate the garden; she seemed so at home there. Yet later, in the summer, when her Mother had to be away for a period, she could care for the house, provide the table, keep everything in order without nervous excitement or exhaustion. There was the other side, too, when at the piano, she accompanied in the family orchestra which consisted of the piano, two violins and a clarinet. Yet, while we were there, she celebrated her thirteenth birthday. Never pushed, never driven, always mistress of her surroundings. It was a joy to see her walking down the road with her fresh, thoughtful face, her strong, graceful carriage, neatly and simply dressed in white from top to toe.

There was the mother who had come to the Island as a bride 23 years before. To us, through the summer, as we gradually learned to know her, she appeared more and more as a remarkable woman. The average city woman would feel that here in this remote Island there was nothing to live for, one would simply lead a monotonous existence. No excitement just work. But to this Island, the home of her husband, she had come to share with him in its cares, its work, its sorrows and its joys. Into the work of wife and mother she had given of a strong personality. It was a professional attitude that she had developed. She had brought in an interest in music. She had brought an interest in good reading. At the end of 23 years, she was the mother of five children, four boys and the daughter,

whom we have already met. Her oldest son was in college, taking a course in electrical engineering. During the summer he with an uncle were running a store at one of the summer resorts down the river. Three boys were at home during the summer. One had completed his school work and was taking a man's share in carrying on the farm. The two others were still in high school, one planning to take a course in an agricultural college and to come back to the farm to live. The other, yet a youth always working, interested in everything, capable, self-reliant and manly. Many a time have I found them washing the dishes and helping about the house. Especially were these evidences of comradeship so tenderly manifested during the early weeks of the summer when the mother was caring for her dying father. Even in this sorrow, there was that strong reserve that bespeaks unexhausted spiritual resources. I shall never forget one Sunday morning soon after we arrived when I made a call. It was one of those quiet summer days, clean soft and still. The mother was sitting in the living room reading. Marcia was at the piano playing and two of the boys were playing with her, while the third was in the kitchen {??} his father. The whole scene, the quietness of it, the restfulness of it, the comradeship of it, made an indelible impression on me. Perhaps here is the point to make a note of the manner of Sunday. No work beyond the chores was ever done. It was a day of rest. Sometimes the motor boat carried them down the river. Sometimes, some of the boys went over to Richmond to church. But mostly, they did not go to church, for the service did not seem to satisfy. I found that they were liberal minded and we found much in common in our religious ideas. In other words, here on this Island, this wife and mother had developed a home with standards, with an atmosphere one could not fail to detect. The achievement of excellence has been called the test of nobility. Here it was, simple, rich wholesome excellence.

All the family seemed related to the place. So also, did the house. It belonged just where it was, located on the only point on the Island where a view of both sides of the river was to be seen. It seemed not to have been built but, like a tree, to have grown there. It housed two families,

the one I have been speaking of and on the other side, was the sister, superintendent of the school of the town, keen, neighborly, generous, with a care over all things. With her lived an aged mother, an invalid confined to a wheel chair. A strong face, generous and happy, bearing witness to a hardihood and virility that enjoyed deeply the common things of life. In the winter, the brother made the third of this second household.

The father and boys worked hard, but their work always seemed to be a pleasure to them. They did it together. Who is final authority in deciding when the hay is ready to go into the barn, I asked one day. "We all express our opinions and act as Father advises," was the answer. Rainy days were spent in the blacksmith shop. Here all repairs of farm machinery were made. Here was the school of industrial training for the boys. Everything from carpenter work to work in iron was done. Bicycles were repaired. Horses were shod. The father was never too busy to stop and explain, not only to his own boys but ours, just why and how things were done. So to the boys, the rainy day became a day of great interest. Things were made. The mind of transforming the raw material of nature to suit his needs and ends. Contrast the relationship between the father and son on this farm between the father and sons of the city. On the farm they work together and in the practical things of life, the father is the constant teacher. In the city, the father works in the factory and the boys find out what he does by reading in books, such as one I saw advertised in the suggestive and pathetic title, "What Daddies Do."

So the boys could make a boat, make everything that they used sleds, ice-boats, shate-boats [sic], sails, gunning floats. They could take a gasoline engine apart and put it together again. They could farm, fish, handle a sail boat, handle a motor boat. One of the summer families bought a new motor boat this summer. The youngest boy of this family was engaged to teach them to run it because he knew how. To be sure, he had never run just the particular kind of engine that this boat carried but he had learned the principle of the thing and was master of it. Still more, in the fall the boys get great fun and the family shared in

the enjoyment of the ducking season. When Thanksgiving comes around, they do not go to the store and buy a turkey for dinner. The boys take their gunning float and get their dinner from the marshes. And such food as the black duck is, especially when it comes to the table in this way. Then, they gather twenty-five to fifty dollars for spending money by fox shooting in the fall and winter. To this form of fun, there comes to their assistance their dog Rover. In connection with Rover I heard one of those illuminating remarks that stuck in my mind and will stick. We were speaking about the friendliness of the dog and the fact that in the winter he likes to sleep in the room with the boys. Turning this conversation the father said, "Well, I don't want any animal around the place that we can't be friendly with." That applied to all, from the oxen to the cats. During the entire summer, I never once heard a harsh word spoken to the animals.

This kind of an education develops a sort of self-reliance that breathes in the atmosphere. One morning, soon after we arrived, I saw the ox teams coming down the road. One of the boys was driving. I stood and watched them pass. The strength, the dignity, the easy and yet powerful carriage of the boy, the atmosphere of power, of command, of supremacy, revealed to me an aspect of life, that, had I been an artist, I would have enjoyed putting onto the canvas as the expression of a supreme achievement in the value of life.

I have tried to suggest the atmosphere of this family, who became very dear friends to us, without being too intimate. I want to, in closing, to relate two experiences that are among the choice ones to me. One I may call the arrival of the new mowing machine. There were some delays in the arrival, so the haying was going rather more slowly than they wished. At last the word came that the machine had just arrived at the station at Richmond. The next morning, we took the scow in tow of the motor boat and went up to Richmond. Soon we had the machine loaded on and were started down the river. Something went wrong with the motor boat and we floated down the river on a strong ebb tide. As we drifted along, one of the boys and I put the machine

together so that, when we arrived at the wharf, it was already to unload and hitch the horses to. Now, the arrival of this machine was an event of importance, not only on the farm but to all the neighbors on the Island and many at a distance. It was a new design, the first one of this design that had been bought in this region. It was an adventure. So the interest in it was keen. For several days, whenever I went to town for groceries, people would ask me how the machine was working and if it had proved as good as was expected. But the point in telling the story is not the fun we had on the scow but just one little incident we had after we unloaded it and the horses were hitched to it ready to take it up to the farm. All the boys were interested, extremely interested. But when all the things were ready to go, the boys insisted that the father must be the first to start it and so, the first one to get into the seat and set it in motion, was the father. All the rest of the day the boys looked over that machine and by lantern lights way into the evening, until every mechanical device was understood and the function of each part mastered.

Finally, I want to speak of two evenings in particular. One Saturday evening, I went up after the milk. I heard music long before I reached the house. The living room was more music room than anything else. It contained an organ, a piano, drum, clarinet, two violins, and three or four music stands. This evening, neighbors, an old man 86 years old, had come in with his flute. The daughter was at the piano, two boys with violins, the third was playing the drum. It was an evening for the old man; he was just as young as the youngest. They were playing his old tunes—jigs, Money Musk, Marching Thru Georgia and the old melodies. It was a joy to see him sit there with one leg thrown up over his knee, his eyes sparkling, and his whole frame aflame with the joy of his companionship with the youngsters. I remained as long as I could and went home. They told me that he stayed until 11:30 before he went yet, so natural and sound.

A second evening was just before we left. One of the boys came down to stay with our children. Annie and I went up for a sing. All hands, myself only excepted, joined in the

singing of familiar tunes. Father, mother, boys and all together with Mrs. Davis sang the round. The grandmother's wheel chair was brought in and she enjoyed it not less than anyone. It was hearty, wholesome, human. After the singing and a few pieces with the violin and piano, we had ice cream and cake. Laughter and buoyancy, relaxation and reserve were there. Mrs. Davis and I felt as we said good night and walked home down the only road of the Island, that we had found at the other end of our shad dinner, some reality, some sound reality and had made friends that, in a few brief weeks, had become precious to us.

Now, these two ends of the shad dinner are marked by contrast in my mind. Which end is which, I leave you to decide. Is that life we found at the Island a bit of the Utopian past, the tail to the shad, whose head carries us to the city with its hurry, and its pressure its loss of the poise and the dignity of life in the senseless round of activity. Or is there, in that Island life, a permanent element of human achievement to the attainment of which we must arrive thru the malaise of our confusing modern city life. Which end of the shad dinner would you rather take part in, the end that caught the shad and produced or the end that consumed the shad, and depended on the hired music and the hired singer and the glaring lights to stir by excitement its already exhausted patrons?

Which touches the real depths of human life? Is the tail of the bony shad of life's dinner pointing away from the city confusion and excitement to the reserve, the dignity, the supremacy of the country where life comes more directly in contact with nature or shall we attain to a deeper life thru the closer contact with humans in the city that is yet to be, furnish our parts toward the soul of humanity.

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