

**A Hermit's Wild Friends**  
or  
**Eighteen Years in the Woods**

By  
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# A Hermit's Wild Friends



THE "HERMIT" AND HIS HOUSE.



TO THE  
LOVERS OF NATURE,  
EVERYWHERE,  
THIS VOLUME IS FRATERNALLY DEDICATED.

## NOTE

During my eighteen years of hermit life, I claim to have discovered several new features in natural history, namely:

That the cow-bunting watches over its young, assists the foster parents in providing food, and gradually assumes full care of the young bird, and takes it to the pasture to associate with its kind; that the white-footed mouse is dumb, and communicates with its species by drumming with its toes; that the wood-thrush conducts a singing-school for the purpose of teaching its young how to sing; that the chickadee can count; that the shadbush on Cape Ann assumes a dwarf form, and grows in patches like the low-bush blueberry, fruiting when less than a foot in height; that the red squirrel owns a farm or fruit garden, and locates his male children on territory which he preempts for the purpose. I am aware that my claims will be vigorously assailed, but I have verified these discoveries by years of patient observation, and would say to my critics: "You would better investigate carefully before denying the probability of any one of these claims."

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M. A. WALTON.

*Gloucester, April 5, 1903.*

# **A Hermit's Wild Friends**

OR

Eighteen Years in the Woods



# I.

## NATURE *versus* MEDICINE

EIGHTEEN years ago I was in sore straits. Ill health had reduced my flesh until I resembled the living skeleton of a dime show. I realized that a few months more of city life would take me beyond the living stage, and that the world would have no further use for me except to adorn some scientific laboratory.

A diagnosis of my case would read as follows:

Dyspepsia, aggravated, medicine could give but slight relief. Catarrh, malignant, persistent. A douche was necessary every morning to relieve the severe facial pain. A cough that had worried me by day and by night, and thrived on all kinds of cough medicine. Also, my lungs were sore and the palms of my hands were hot and dry. I thought that I was fading away with consumption, but the doctors said my lungs were sound. I was advised to go into the woods and try life in a pine grove. As there was no money for the doctors in this advice, I looked upon it as kind and disinterested, but my mind ran in another direction.

When I was young and full of notions, the idea entered my head that I should like a change from fresh to salt water. It resulted in a two months' trip on a fishing schooner. During the trip I had been free from seasickness, and had gained flesh rapidly. The memory of that sea voyage haunted me, now that I had become sick and discouraged. It seemed to me that a few weeks on salt water would save my life.

With high hopes, I boarded the little steamer that plied between Boston and Gloucester. I thought it would be an easy matter to secure board on one of the many vessels that made short trips after mackerel. For three days I haunted the wharves in vain. The "skippers," one and all, gave the same reason for refusing my offers. "We are going after fish," said they, "and cannot be bothered with a sick man." At last one "skipper" discouraged me completely. He said to me: "I once took a sick man on board, and because we did not strike fish, the fishermen called the passenger a Jonah, and made his life miserable. Three days after we returned he died, and I swore then that I never would take another sick man to sea." This "skipper's" story, and my fruitless efforts caused me to abandon the salt water cure. I turned now to the hills around Gloucester. In the end I selected Bond's Hill, because it was surrounded by pine groves.

I found the hill covered with blueberry and huckleberry bushes, the latter loaded with fruit. On the brow of the hill the soil had been washed away, leaving great masses of bed rock (granite) towering above the cottages that clung to the base of the cliff. On the extreme brow of the hill I found a spot where the soil had gathered and maintained a grass-plot. Here I pitched my little tent. Here I lived from August to December. I called the spot the Eyrie, because it reminded me of the regions inhabited by eagles. A visit to the spot will disclose the fitness of the name.

On this spot my eighteen years of hermit life begun. At first I made it a practice to go to the city every day for one meal, bringing back food enough to last until another day. I found the huckleberries good wholesome food that did not aggravate my chronic dyspepsia.

Two weeks of outdoor life had brought a little color to my cheeks and had made me feel like a new man. About this time I awoke in the morning to remember that I had not coughed during the night. The cough that had harassed me night and day for two years, left me then and there, never to return.

Nature was performing wonders where medicine had failed.

Before the month of September had ended, my catarrh disappeared, and I no longer had use for the douche. From that time to this, I have been free from catarrh. I do not have even the symptoms, known as hay-fever.

The dull, heavy pain that I had experienced constantly from dyspepsia, gradually subsided and eventually ceased. Since that time I have been able to eat any kind of food, at any time, day or night, without the depressing pains of indigestion.

During my first experience, climbing Bond's Hill, on my return from the city, had been almost beyond my strength. I had to rest three times before reaching my tent. By the middle of November my strength had returned nearly to the old standard, and I mounted the hill without a thought of weariness.

Standing one day on a massive spur of bed rock, near my tent, my thoughts went back to the statement of the doctors in relation to my lungs. I had just ascended the hill, without a long breath, and a hale, hearty feeling pervaded every fibre of my system. I knew, then, that my lungs were all right, and thanks to Nature, I had recovered my health and stood there comparatively a well man.

While I was yet weak, I passed many hours at the Eyrie, entranced by the magnificent panorama spread before me. I could see the

larger part of the city of Gloucester, which extended, in a semicircle, from Riverdale to Eastern Point.

Later in the season I watched the ebb and flow of the tide on the marshes that border Annisquam River.

The Outer Harbor, with Ten Pound Island near the entrance of the Inner Harbor, lay in plain view, and the shifting scenes on its restless waters possessed a fascination which I could seldom resist.

Day after day I watched the vessels of the fishing fleet as they rounded Eastern Point, bound outward or inward. These vessels were models of beauty, and looked as if they were built for racing instead of fishing. I often compared them with the clumsy coasters that rode at anchor in the Outer Harbor.

Now and then a vessel, homeward bound, rounded Eastern Point with her flag half-mast. Mute reminder of the hardships and perils of a fisherman's life.

Every morning soon after it had become light enough to see, several boats could be seen rowing shoreward. Usually there was only one man to a boat. It did not take me long to find out that these lone rowers coming in out of the night were fishermen that pulled their lobster-pots after one o'clock in the morning. I saw another lone fisherman sail out of the harbor every morning when there was wind enough to fill a dory sail. Day after day he sailed or rowed out to sea to fish for shore codfish. He supported a large family from the proceeds of his labor, but the life was lonely and perilous. I watched his return once when the wind was blowing a fierce gale. The little boat would careen until the sail trailed in the water and it seemed to me that she must capsize. At the last moment she would come up into the wind and right. In this slow,

dangerous manner she was worked to the mouth of Annisquam River and tied up above the Cut Bridge. The next day I asked the fisherman how he had managed to keep his boat right side up. "Oh, that was easy. When she heeled too much, I *shook her up*, and kept her from taking in water." "*Shook her up*," was a new phrase to me.

Below my Eyrie lay the little hamlet called the Cut. Some of its cottages had straggled up to the base of the cliff just below the tent.

I could look down on a long stretch of Western Avenue beginning at the Cut and ending in Ward Five, beyond the Cut Bridge. The latter was a drawbridge, and when open the city of Gloucester was on an island, with the exception of Ward Eight, which lies on the west side of Annisquam River.

I had located in Ward Eight, but at the time did not know anything in relation to its size, as compared with the other wards of the city. A glance at the map in the city directory showed me that Ward Eight was larger in area than all the other wards combined. I also found that it comprised within its limits the Cut, Fresh Water Cove, West Gloucester, and Magnolia. It pleased me much to find that it contained about twelve thousand acres of shrub land and forest.

Two-thirds of the way from the Cut to the drawbridge, Essex Avenue connects with Western Avenue. Essex Avenue crosses the marsh to West Gloucester, and is the highway into the city for Essex and other distant towns. There is a constant stream of travel over this highway, divided among farmers, icemen, and pleasure-seekers. The travel on Western Avenue is now, and was then, made up largely from the summer colonies at Magnolia and Manchester. Showy turnouts passed and repassed, so that I had enough to attract my attention from sunrise to sunset. When facing the harbor, I

could turn to the left and look across the marsh to Dogtown Common. I had to look above and beyond a straggling portion of the city. Dogtown Common, in Revolutionary days, contained forty dwellings; now it was houseless. I saw only a boulder-covered region of pasture-land, choked by huckleberry and blueberry bushes, with here and there large tangles of catbrier.

Some of the sunsets seen from the Eyrie were beautiful beyond description. Whenever a massive bank of clouds hung above the western horizon, the setting sun illuminated the city from Riverdale to Eastern Point, and every window in sight glowed like burnished gold.

Until the middle of November the weather continued mild and balmy, with but a few stormy days. I recall, with pleasure and satisfaction, the evenings passed at the Eyrie. Perched on the brow of the cliff, I studied the city by moonlight, lamplight, and gaslight. On dark nights the lights of the city took on the shape of a huge monster, half-coiled, and extended from Riverdale to Eastern Point Light. The latter is a revolving red light, and it gave the semblance of life to the one-eyed monster which constantly blinked its great red eye. It pleased me to call this imaginary monster the sea-serpent. Gloucester owes her growth to the sea, and she might well take on the shape of the sea-serpent.

When the danger-signals were up, the Outer Harbor was crowded with craft of all kinds. At night time the tossing lights on the vessels contrasted strangely with the fixed lights on shore.

The twin lights on Thatcher's Island could be seen from the Eyrie, and I often wondered if these lights were necessary. To the middle of November I had seen the sea only in comparatively fair weather,

when it was on its good behavior. Afterward a storm that wrecked my tent, and brought in its wake huge waves that thundered against the headlands of Cape Ann, caused me to wonder in another direction. It seems incredible, but it is a fact, that I could feel the solid rock tremble beneath my tent from the shock of wave against headland, one fourth of a mile distant.

The storm died out, but it left an impression on my mind that caused me to look for a locality less exposed to the wind. I found an ideal spot on the "Old Salem Road." The spot was surrounded by wooded hills, where a little brook crept out of a swamp and crossed to the south side of the old highway. After crossing the highway, the waters of the brook went tumbling and singing down to another swamp, where they were lost in a tangle of moss, ferns, and marsh-marigolds.

The Old Salem Road had been deserted more than one hundred years, save as a wood road in winter. At one time it was the connecting link between Salem and Gloucester. Seven ruined cellars indicate the spots where dwelling-houses once stood.

I moved my tent from the Eyrie, and put it up within the limits of the old highway, and begun to build a little log cabin in which to spend the winter.

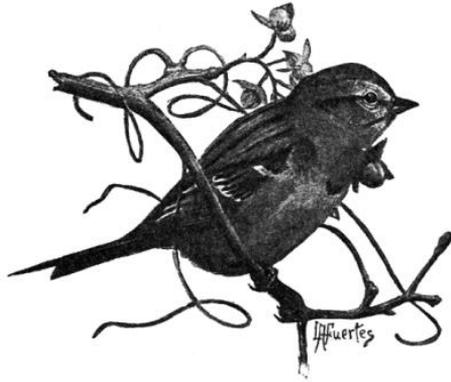
While in the tent I experienced zero weather, and it may be of interest to know how I managed to keep warm. I had picked up two discarded milk-cans, and these I filled with hard wood coals from a fire which I maintained near the tent. By closing the flaps of the tent the heat from the cans would keep up an even temperature through the night. If it happened to get cold toward morning I would burn a newspaper now and then, which would warm the tent

until light enough to start an outdoor fire. I baked beans in a hole in the ground, in true Maine camp style. There would be coals enough under the bean-pot, in the morning, to cook coffee, and hot coffee and baked beans seemed to go to the right spot when the thermometer was hanging around zero, and one was living in a cotton tent.

I did my cooking on a bed of red hot coals, thus avoiding smoked food and the loss of coffee-pot handle or spout. Hemlock bark from a dead tree will give the best coals in the shortest time.

By the middle of December I had moved into my log cabin. I put in a second-hand range, which proved to be an excellent baker and warmed the cabin in the coldest weather. The remainder of the winter "I was as snug as a bug in a rug," to use an old familiar adage.

Before the winter months had passed, chickadees, black snow-birds, and tree-sparrows found their way into the cabin dooryard. I fed lard to the chickadees on a chip, and the birds would eat this clear fat, at short intervals, all day, and come around the next morning none the worse for the strange diet. Certainly such food would kill any other bird. The snow-birds and sparrows were fed on different kinds of bird-seed. When I mention sparrows I do not refer to the English sparrow. I am pleased to state that this undesirable alien does not come to my dooryard. The tree-sparrow is a native bird, and here on the Cape, is seen only in winter. It comes to us in October, and leaves by the first of April. The tree-sparrow is an interesting bird to know. It comes to us in the winter when the most of our birds are in the South. It is a handsome bird from a sparrow standpoint.



TREE SPARROW.

The crown is a bright chestnut, and there are chestnut markings on the side of the head and on the bend of the wing. The back is boldly streaked with black, bay, and light gray. There is much white edging to the feathers of the tail and wings in winter. A few of these birds stopped about the cabin all winter; but a flock numbering hundreds wintered on Bond's Hill. On warm days they roamed over the hill, far and near, always flying low and keeping well down in the shrubby growth. But when the weather was cold I would find them in a sheltered spot, where meadowsweet, bayberry, hardhack, blueberry, huckleberry, and sweet-fern shrubs crowded each other until their interwoven branches held a mantle of snow. Beneath this shelter the birds seemed to find food, for they were busy at all hours of the day. I passed many hours watching them while they were thus secluded. Invariably I found them chirping to each other, and by listening closely I could catch snatches of song low and sweet. The last of March their low song could be heard in the shrub-lands. Later, when the song-sparrows

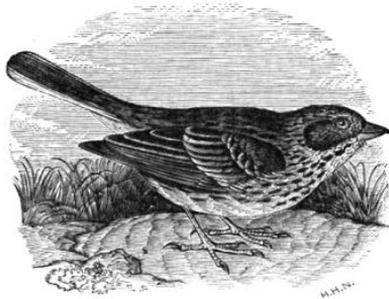
and bluebirds swelled the chorus, the tree-sparrows silently disappeared.



FOX SPARROW.

April 3d, in the morning, I found a large flock of fox-sparrows in the dooryard. It is somewhat singular that for three years they appeared on the same day of the month. One year, April 3, 1887, I awoke in the morning to find three feet of snow in the dooryard, and I was obliged to shovel the snow away in order to feed the sparrows on bare ground. The fox-sparrow is two-thirds as large as a robin, and may be classed with the beautiful birds both in form and coloration. The sexes are alike. The color above is a rich rusty red, deepest and brightest on the wings, tail, and rump. The head, neck, and shoulders are a dark ash-color, more or less streaked with rusty red. Below the groundwork is snow-white, also thickly spotted with rust red. It could be called a wood-thrush by a careless observer. These birds are migrants with us, and pass through the State to their breeding-grounds in April, to return in October. It is

usually six weeks from the time the first flock appears before the loiterers are all gone. The flock that called on me was a very large one, numbering over one hundred birds. Mornings they made the woods ring with their delightful music.



BAY-WINGED BUNTING.

When the birds returned in April and May, I found that I was a trespasser on the nesting-ground of many a woodland bird. Catbirds, towhee-buntings, robins, thrushes, and numerous warblers nested around my cabin.

By this time I had settled down to hermit-life in earnest. I had tried the experiment of "Nature *versus* Medicine," and Nature had triumphed. With good health, with strange birds and flowers to study and identify, I was content to spend a portion of my rescued life in Dame Nature's company.

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