THOREAU'S MATERNAL GRANDFATHER ASA DUNBAR:

FRAGMENTS FROM HIS DIARY AND COMMON-PLACE BOOK.[1]

COMMUNICATED BY E. HARLOW RUSSELL.

The interest, whether much or little, that may lie in the document to which I have the honor to invite your brief attention, is twofold, or has two sources: First, the near relation of Asa Dunbar the diarist to Henry Thoreau, one of the most original, perspicacious and suggestive writers that America has produced; and secondly, the ever-interesting period of our history which is reflected, though for the most part dimly and brokenly, in its scanty pages.

As to the first point, we are admonished by the voice of science that laymen had better refrain from speaking overconfidently with regard to heredity—at least until the rival hypotheses that now divide the opinions of leading scientific men shall have been brought into more harmonious and comprehensible adjustment. Moreover, common sense should restrain us from the conceit of singling out a distinguished or favorite ancestor, ignoring the other three or other seven, and tracing from him alone whatever desirable qualities his descendants may exhibit or lay claim to or ask to have inferred from his superiority. But, in the meantime, while we are waiting for the verdict of science, we may perhaps continue to gratify a natural and deep-seated curiosity, not wholly unintelligent, by observing and comparing strongly-marked features, bodily and mental, that reappear in varying strength, whatever the cause or mode, in successive generations.

[1]The original manuscript volume, by gift of Mr. Russell, is now in the possession of the Society.

Mr. F. B. Sanborn, in his careful and authoritative biography or Henry Thoreau, speaking of the four children born to John Thoreau and Cynthia Dunbar, says: "The two eldest, John and Helen, were said to be 'clear Thoreau,' and the others, Henry and Sophia, 'clear Dunbar'." This naturally directs our attention to Henry's mother, the youngest of the seven children of Asa Dunbar and Mary Jones. By all accounts she was a woman of marked individuality, handsome, vivacious, and, according to Mr. Sanborn, who was for a time an inmate of her household, "with sharp and sudden flashes of gossip and malice, which never quite amounted to ill-nature, but greatly provoked the prim and commonplace respectability that she so often came in contact with." By the same authority we are assured of her excessive loquacity, insomuch, he says, that "her conversation generally put a stop to other occupations;" but he does not fail to add that "along with this humorous quality, there went also an affectionate earnestness in her relation with those who depended on her." It is notable that this gift of expression appears unmistakably, indeed conspicuously, though in somewhat different modes of manifestation, in the three generations under consideration, most of all in the grandson.

The two professions, the clerical and the legal, chosen and practised with considerable distinction by Asa Dunbar, both require the qualification of facile and effective discourse, and the reputation which he enjoyed, first as a clergyman and subsequently as a lawyer, easily warrants the inference that he was a forcible and persuasive speaker, though with exactly what graces of oratory I have not been able to learn. His eminent grandson, whenever he spoke in public, did so with directness, precision, force and pungency, but with evident disdain of elocution, or what Webster calls "the graces taught in the schools," and there is no evidence that Thoreau possessed the gift of oratory. He was a writer rather than a speaker, and his grandfather's Commonplace Book clearly shows that he also bestowed great pains upon the form of his public utterances and even upon private letters and notes. This brief diary, which

Mr. Sanborn aptly calls "a faint foreshadowing of his grandson's copious journals," shows but the barest outline or skeleton of the life he led, the entries being comparatively few, often widely separated, and for the most part condensed to the utmost. About two-thirds of the thin volume is taken up with forms or rehearsals of public prayers, written out in full, to be used in various clerical functions, as stated Sabbath services, marriages, funerals, baptisms, etc., and similar careful drafts of letters, and two or three pieces of a humorous character, which we shall come to later, all tending to show that the grandfather, like the grandson, took easily and often to his pen. And I may mention, by the way, that in so trivial a matter as handwriting there is a considerable resemblance, made more apparent, no doubt, by the fact that both used the quill pen. Both, also, were careless spellers, a thing less surprising in the grandfather, at a time when orthography was comparatively unsettled, than in the scholarly and scrupulous writer of two generations later.

In a burlesque narrative of the Students' Rebellion at Harvard College in 1766, written in scriptural language, undoubtedly by Dunbar himself, he is designated as "Asa the Scribe," and he was not only the historian of that affair, but the spokesman of the rebellious students. His amusing account of their side of that uprising, which at its height threatened very serious consequences, is included in an able and exhaustive paper on the Rebellion communicated recently to the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, by Mr. William C. Lane. Emerson says of Thoreau that he was "a protestant *a l' outrance*, and we see evidence in the attitude of young Dunbar that the blood of dissent, of which Henry Thoreau so liberally partook, was in active circulation a half-century at least before it reached his veins.

In the same vein and style with the narrative just mentioned, he writes a reminiscent account of an incident which took place in a school that he was keeping in the town of Mystic, now, I suppose, Medford, or its vicinity.[1] It illus-

[1] I am indebted to our associate, Mr. William E. Foster, for the suggestion that the "Mistick" referred to may have been a locality in what is now the township of Groton, Conn.

trates at once the humor and ingenuity of the writer, and at the same time throws a ray of light upon New England school-keeping in colonial days.

"THE BOOK OF ASA THE SCRIBE.

CHAPTER I.

1. There was a man of pontiquinum [Dunbar was born in the town of Bridgewater, the home of his father's family.] whose name was Asa: the same also, whenas he had none inheritance in pontiquinum, went down into Mistick to sojourn there.

2. Moreover Asa was a wise man, and skilled in all the learning of the harvardites.

3. And it came to pass, when the mistickites saw Asa, that he was a wise man and skilled in all the learning of the Harvardites, that they spake one to another, saying,

4. Do not our children and our servants suffer for lack of instruction? and we ourselves have no time to instruct them, for the labour that is upon our hands.

5. And behold we have victuals and lodging, and mony in our purses, and our young men be very numerous..

6. Go to now therefore, let us entreat Asa, & give him mony, even sixty shekles of silver, & make Asa ruler of the pedagogue to instruct our sons & our servants.

7. And the mistickites did so, & entreated Asa, & offered him sixty shekles of silver, & Asa consented to their entreaties.

8. So Asa instructed the children & the servants of the mistickites, three months, for sixty shekles of silver.

9. And Asa lodged at the house of one Joseph a brickmaker, which standeth over against the pedagogue, as thou passest thro the gate, towards the north, by the house of Ebenezer the priest.

10. And it was so, that when Asa entered in thro. the door into the pedagogue, he uncovered his head & bowed himself unto the youngmen of the mistickites.

11. Then also the children and the servants of the mistickites, & all the young men rose up & bowed themselves unto Asa & did obeysance.

CHAPTER 2.

1. Now it came to pass in process of time, when Asa went to execute his office in the pedagogue, that he bowed himself as heretofore, & all the young men rose up and bowed themselves & made obeysance.

2. But Andrew the son of Benjamin rose not up nor made obeysance, neither regarded he him at all.

3. Then Asa when he saw that Andrew rose not up neither regarded him at all, went unto his own place, & sat down & called Andrew unto him & spake, saying,

4. Wherefore do I behold this thing in thee? & why hast thou done thus? to set an evil example before the young men.

5. Now therefore I will punish thee with stripes that the young men may see & be afraid, lest peradventure they also be disobedient.

6. Then Andrew fell on his knees & wept bitterly, with many tears, & said unto Asa, forgive, O Sir, I pray thee, & let thine anger be turned away from me, & surely thy servant will do no more so foolishly.

7. Then Asa had compassion on Andrew, & raised him up, & spake comfortably to him & forgave him, & laid no stripes upon him.

8. Moreover it came to pass after many days, when the fear of Asa had ceased to make Andrew afraid, that behold he again also rose not up, nor made obeysance, neither regarded him at all.

9. Then the anger of Asa was kindled a second time against Andrew, more than at the first, & Asa reproved Andrew, saying,

10. Is not this the second time that thou hast delt thus impudently with me? And surely the first time I forgave thee, because of thy tears, & thy promises, & thine entreaties.

11. Now therefore why hast thou done thus impudently again, to set an evil example before the young men?

12. And Andrew was silent, neither opened he his mouth to answer any thing to all the words which Asa had spoken unto him: for he stood guilty.

13. And when Asa saw that he answer'd not a word, neither humbled himself as at the first time, then was Asa exceding wroth & his anger burned against Andrew.

14. Moreover Asa smote Andrew on his ear, with the palm of his hand, insomuch that he fell down at his feet, as one having no strength.

15. And when the children & the servants of the mistickites saw what was done, they were sore afraid; & all the young men did excedingly quake & tremble for fear of Asa, for his fear fell on them all.

16. Therefore none of the young men did after the example of Andrew, but rose up & bowed themselves, & made obeysance lest the wrath of Asa should fall on them as it had done on Andrew their brother, before their eyes."

The diary shows in several places a thoughtful and philosophic turn of mind, a quality remarkably developed in Thoreau and pervading all his writings.

When, at the age of twenty-seven, Mr. Dunbar was settled in the ministry, at Salem, as colleague with Rev. Thomas Barnard, it appears from a letter to his father that his "sallery" was to be £133–6–8 a year. A few months later, with the prospect of a family to support, he must have felt the severe limitations of his income, but he consoles himself with this reflection:

"Half pay is better than no pay. Covetousness is Idolatry." Here is another reflection: "Make a man believe he is virtuous & he will not behave dishonorably." And another: "Suspicion & jealousy arise from y^{e} ignorance of somewhat; yet y^{e} most ignorant are not always y^{e} most suspicious." He does not over-estimate the persuasiveness of his ministry: "None are so deaf," he writes, "as they that will not hear. I see by visiting that my preaching does but little good." Here is a word of frank dissent: "Let no man pretend to prefection, for brother Willard & I cannot think alike." This brother Willard, then minister at Beverly, was afterwards president of Harvard College. On Wednesday, July 24, 1773, "Commencement at Cambridge." Next day, "dined at Mrs. Goldthwait's." On the day following the dinner the only entry is, "*Dissipatio mentis est ruina.*" But he got home to Salem Saturday night, and writes for Sunday: "Preached all day. Married a Couple at even."

What there is of the diary begins with the month of July, 1773, the year following his settlement at Salem, and marked for the young couple by the birth of their first child. The draft of a letter to Mrs. Dunbar's father, Colonel Jones, announcing the event, begins as follows:

"Dear Sir, I have y^{e} happiness of informing you that Mrs. Dunbar is comfortably abed with a Daughter. She was delivered about three O'Clk this morning, after a moderate illness of thirty-six hours. Her circumstances seem very agreeable, & y^{e} child is a perfect & promising child. We have already named her after both her grand-Mammas and her immediate mother, and we will endeavor that she shall not disgrace y^{e} name wh. they have born with so much honor."

In December, 1774, he records that "Doctr. Lathome came to Town to inoculate for y^{e} small pox in Salem Hos-

pital." And it appears that Mr. Dunbar decided to become one of Dr. Lathome's patients. "Jan. 3d, 1774, Began to take Phisic preparatory to y^e^ small pox." Jan. 7th, "Went to y^e^ Hospital & was inoculated for y^e^ small pox." Jan. 9th, "Preached at y^e^ Hospital upon temperance." Jan. 15, "Symptoms at their hight. wrote a sermon." Jan. 16th, "Preached at y^e^ Hospital upon chearfulness." Jan. 23, "Broke out at y^e^ fullest." Jan. 30th, "Very much unstrung with taking phisic." Jan 31st, "Left y^e^ Hospital this morning." Thus the siege had occupied within two days of a month.

Of the stirring times that ushered in the Revolution, the diary affords a few brief glimpses. On the 16th of May, 1774, "Governor Gage arrived about this time," and on the 2nd of June, "General Gage came to town." April 19, 1775, "Hostilities commenced at Concord & Lexington." It seems that Dunbar's father-in-law, Col. Elisha Jones of Weston, was a tory, and that several of his sons were not only sympathetic but active on the British side, and on the 1st of May of this year, the journal speaks of Jones's cattle, "hey" & servant being "attached." On the 5th he says, "Company at my house after Jonas Jones—went to head-quarters with him;" and on the 9th, "attended Jones before y^e^ Com^ee^ of Correspondence;" and a few days later, "attend again before y^e^ Com^ee^." Mr. Sanborn states that two of Mrs. Dunbar's brothers, sons of Col. Jones, were apprehended for toryism and imprisoned in Concord gaol, from which one of them, Josiah was "assisted" to make his escape and flee to the British provinces. Dunbar records the event in this wise: Oct. 4, 1775, "Josiah Jones broke out of Concord goal." On the 27th he records, "Battle at Chelsea." On Wednesday, May 31st, "President Langdon preached to y^e^ Congress, Watertown;" and next day, "Convention at Watertown." He was living at this time in Weston, but continued his ministry in Salem, going thither weekly. On the memorable Saturday, June 17, he says, "prevented from going to Salem by y^e^ battle at Charlestown." On the 4th of March, 1776, he records that "y^e^ militia went to Roxbury," on occasion of the Town meeting, and returned

three days later, and on the 17th of May following he records a "Continental fast." On Sunday, the 26th he says, "Preached all day, spake against y^{e} test act."

Before this period, in the draft of a public prayer for Sunday morning service, he writes with due loyalty, "May thy servant George, our King, our gracious queen, & all y^{e} royal family long live in peace on earth, be extensive blessings in y^{e} world, & hereafter be crowned with immortal life and glory. May y^{e} british islands in y^{e} sea rejoice in thy goodness, & these colonies on y^{e} continent ever flourish before thee." A passage in one of his later prayers, apparently on an occasion of public thanksgiving, breathes a strain of grateful exultation under a changed condition of things: "We thank thee that thou hast so far supported us in our exertions against our enemies, & so far seconded our endeavors to maintain & secure our natural rights & privileges. We adore thee, especially, that in a late instance of divine interposition, in wh. thine arm, O Lord of hosts & God of armies, very conspicuously appears, thou hast given us a complete victory over a whole army. Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name be y^{e} praise; for thine is y^{e} power and y^{e} glory & y^{e} victory. We thank thee that thou hast preserved y^{e} lives of so many of our officers and soldiers, and especially y^{e} important life of our illustrious Commander in chief. We adore thy wisdom and goodness that y^{e} Union of these American states has been so happily continued, and apparently strengthened."

There is evidence in these pages that Mr. Dunbar had something of the colonial thrift that was a part of the life of the time. He records the purchase of a horse and of a load of hay. A day or two after the battle of Bunker Hill is this entry: "Fixed my sythes for mowing," and a month later, "Finished mowing my upland." He secured summer pasturage at a considerable distance, as appears from the following entries: "May 16, 1775. Went to Prince Town with cattle to pasture." "Yearlings came home from Princetown, with y^{e} two fat cows." And a few weeks later, "The two-year-olds came home from Princetown." A few items of debit and credit are given:

"Rec'd 102 lbs. flax cost £6–2–0". "Dr. for Gown & paper, £5–10–0. Cr. for bed, £3–1–0. Dr. for family expenses, £1–12–8. Dr. for loaf sugar £0–18–0. Cr. for cash £6–0–0." The entry, "Stock in trade £50–0–0" is not quite clear, unless he refers to transactions connected with his farming.

The shadow of frequent illness hangs over the whole diary. He speaks of it as "ye Cholic," and the frequency, disabling severity, and length of the seizures are extraordinary and pitiable. In August, 1775, he writes diagonally down the page covering three-fourths of the month: "Cholic very bad a long time & little intermission." These attacks so seriously interrupted the stated duties of his ministry that he finally felt obliged to abandon the profession, and addressed a formal and touching letter to his church, beginning thus: "Such is the general state of my health that I judge it expedient for me to ask a dismission from your service in the Gospel ministry. This request I doubt not you will think to be reasonable, and I hope your compliance with it will be greatly to your own interest." This was in April, 1779, when he was thirty-four years old. He renders to the Society a scrupulous account of what he has received from them by taxation, subscription, and private donations, from which it appears that they are considerably in his debt, but such was their good will towards him that they voted him £700, a sum £50 in excess of what was legally due.

A new life opened for Asa Dunbar when, a few years later, he was admitted to the New Hampshire bar and established himself in the practice of law at Keene, where he soon rose to prominence in his profession and was highly respected as a citizen. He was a zealous Freemason, and there is preserved in the library of our Society a pamphlet bearing the following lengthy title: "An Oration: delivered at the Reverend T. Harrington's Church, Lancaster, June 25th, Anno Lucis, 5781, upon the Festival of St. John the Baptist; in presence of The Brethren of Trinity Lodge, No. 6, of the most ancient & honorable Society of Free & Accepted Masons, under the Jurisdiction of the most worshipful Grand Lodge in Boston, Commonwealth of Mass-

achusetts, by our Rev. Brother A. Dunbar. Worcester, (Massachusetts) Printed by Brother Isaiah Thomas MDCCLXXXI (A. L. 5781)."

All accounts of Henry Thoreau agree with Emerson's emphatic testimony that he "was sincerity itself, and might fortify the convictions of prophets in the ethical laws by his holy living;" that he was "a truth-speaker, capable of the most deep and strict conversation."

Let me quote a passage from his grandfather's Masonic oration, just mentioned, which shows the same moral fibre, though in a relation and service quite too formal and artificial, I imagine, for the grandson's taste.

> "It is justly characteristic of a wise man to *build* his house upon a rock;—that is to say—upon a foundation that will not fail him. And when we pass into *metaphor*, and *allegory*, and consider happiness at large, as a *building* which every man is concerned in erecting for himself, wisdom, without doubt, requires no less care, than in literal *architecture* that the basis be sure and immovable. This basis can be no other than *truth*. Truth is the foundation upon which whoever builds as a skilful *mason* resteth his whole structure. He never acts a falsehood, nor makes a refuge of lies his confidence."

When in 1773, President Locke, of Harvard College, suddenly tendered his resignation, for which the records of the college, as stated in Quincy's History (II. p. 160), "assigned no motive, and expressed no regret," Dunbar's diary, after recording specifically the occasion of the resignation, utters this lamentation over the event: "O Locke! How soon and how shamefully art thou fallen from y^{e} highest pinacle of prosperity into y^{e} lowest abyss of adversity!"

In the midst of an active life, with a young family about him, while holding two important town offices, Asa Dunbar died, June 22, 1787, exactly one month after the birth of his daughter Cynthia, who, in 1812, married John Thoreau, and, in 1817, became the mother of Henry David Thoreau. Grandfather and grandson both died in their prime, in the fifth decade of their lives, at forty-two and forty-six years, respectively.

Poet and philosopher as Thoreau was, dealing daily in his thought and with his pen with the most serious things of life, nothing could quench the flow of humor which issued

from the very depths of his nature. It was so native to him that it often seems an intrusion upon the graver moods of his writing, and his friend and biographer Channing speaks of his rubbing out, upon revision, the more humorous part of some of his articles, and saying, "I cannot bear the levity I find;" and Channing adds, "As to his laughing, no one did that more or better." It is not surprising, then, to discover that gleams of humor and fun often light up the clerical decorum of his reverend grandfather's diary and Commonplace-book, as already instanced. On March 4, 1774, he says, "Our Cow bro't to bed of a girl baby." Of what must have been a rough trip across-lots he writes, "Rode with Dr. Putnam to see his wood lot & did not breack my neck."

Wit, playfulness, literary facility, and a glimpse at the way in which strong drink was regarded in his day, are shown in the verses that conclude our little volume and end the present paper.

"To Mr. Flagg Upon receiving some Jamaica Spirit of Him.

In days of yore, when grog was scase,
No soul could ever write a verse
Unless some heathen pow'r inspir'd
The passion, which y^{e} poet fir'd.
In short y^{e} Muses all must join,
To dictate ev'ry gen'rous line.
Yet these shall pass by me uncourted;
My song is otherwise supported.
You may in truth ascribe its merit
To th' only force of india-spirit.
No other pow'r I here invoke,
To furnish out a single stroke;
I ask y^{e} aid of grog alone,
And by its help my verse goes on.
This noble spirit does impart,
The most sublime poetic art;
It fills y^{e} soul with grateful flame
T'ward him from whom y^{e} spirit came;
And while its influence I feel,
My gratitude I can'nt conceal.
So in return for all your liquor,
I am your humble servant,

Vicar.

January 1, 1778."