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## WOODCHUCKS.

DEAR LEMUEL :

Since you desire it, this letter shall treat of the Woodchuck, his life and death, and of associated themes. It shall be the Dashes at, the Glimpses, Glances, Recollections of the Life of him—the Sayings and Doings, the Domestic Manners, the Men and Things, of him. It shall, then, be more dull (?) and instructive than my missives usually are; not, however, scientifically nice and formal. Rather, still “in an extemporanean style, (as I do commonly at all other exercises,) *effudi quid-quid dictavit genius meus*; and writ with as small deliberation as I do ordinarily speak, without all affectation of big words—*idem calamo, quod in mente.*”<sup>\*</sup> I shall not forego my wonted epistolary privilege of egotism and discursiveness; and in spite of the formidable promise of the first sentences, you need look only for “a desultory and antoschediastic, off-hand, and extemporaneous article.”

Among agriculturists, this beast is a nuisance. Among scientific naturalists, he is of the genus *arctomys*—*αρκτος*, a bear, and *μῦς*, a mouse—the *mus monax* of some, the *mus empetra* with others. “*Supra fusco,*” say the books, “*cinereus, subtus sub-rufus, capite, canda, pedibus-que fuscis,*”

\* Burton's Anat. Mel.

&c.; and more, all in the classic dead languages, which sounds oddly to one who has been used to see the subject in his rough-and-tumble vivacity. It is amusing, instructive, or humiliating, according as your philosophy, rather as your temperament or stomach, which decides your philosophy, is humorous, thoughtfully-observant or over humanly-conceited, to mark the resemblances between this *genus arctomys* and certain of the *genus homo*. You, who can be grateful for or proud of the high position in the scale of living creation that you enjoy, and yet not forget that all this creation has a common Maker and Disposer, and that so all its members are in some sort your brethren, will kindly smile while reading a description, confirmed, and slightly added to by my own frequent experience, taken from Audubon. Firstly, you will see his likeness to the bear often paralleled by the ursine manners of door-keepers, rail-car conductors, and other such briefly-authorized officials—shame-faced worth and repulsed poverty can bear testimony to their too frequent presence, on the front seats and in the passenger cars. Then, my author goes on to say, "the body is thick and the legs are short, so that the belly nearly touches the ground;" here we see the type of the well-fed city fathers, and of other adipose waddlers, whose uncared minds have never interfered with the nutritive processes—good-natured and prosperous—whom it is a comfort to look upon. "Head short," runs the record; wherein again we and they are common—for we except and distinguish a man as peculiar, when we say he has a "long head"—and you know, *exceptio probat regulum*,—though, by the way, I never could see how an exception proves the rule, till it is proved to be an exception, by which time proof of the rule, I apprehend, becomes unnecessary. Meantime the phrase is convenient as a substitute for argument, and imposes, by its foreign air, like some other things of small intrinsic worth. "Eyes moderate"—that is, not speculative, like those of the senior Hamlet's Ghost and of prudent merchants. In this respect there is not so general a likeness as I could wish between the "subject of this memoir," and we others. Unhappily the eyes of a great many men are (excuse the vulgarity of the sensible old phrase) too big for their belly. And from this disagreement in the size of organs come ill-digested schemes, a making haste to be rich, for whose ill consequences poor government officers are blamed. Hard times are often all in your eye. Your ruin and distress that we hear so much of every few years, coupled with abuse of the men at Washington, are not so much owing to their ignorance of finance, as to the low state of ophthalmology in the marts of business. But to return to our friend. Now he seems sinking into the dandiacal classes, for he hath "whiskers numerous." But anon he rises among the healthy vulgar, with his "legs short and muscular," so unlike the select spindles of refined drawing-rooms. "Toes long and well-separated, palms naked," as they are still to be seen on those from whom the upper ten thousand eventually draws its recruits—did it not, this front rank of a foolish legion would degenerate into cripples and malformations in a few generations, and in a few more the race would only be known by its tomb-stones. Once more, however, with apparent inconsistency, our friend presents his foot and proffers his claim to admission in polished society, whose members wear snug boots. As a soldier might show his scars to forgetful comrades, so he displays the "tubercles at the roots of the toes"—his corniger certificate of right to be placed on equal footing. But above all, these words, as I read, anthropomorphized him, inspired more fraternal sentiment regarding him than the rest. He has the "rudiments of a thumb with a minute nail." As though he were struggling up to humanity, pursuing it under difficulties, with that dogged industry, that has made so many moderately-endowed

men to become men of mark, and as though his experimental attempt in this direction were not yet consummated. Thus far, with all his strivings, he has only mastered the rudiments, and must wait, no one knows how many ages, for such auspicious developing circumstances as will enable him to attain to the higher joints. Studying, drudging over the "rudiments," as Mr. Cophagus' apprentice calls them, I cannot help feeling that he is a fit subject of action for some benevolent society—that some loving, disinterested individual should write in a simple style, a little manual for his use, and that some other of like attributes should publish this—*Thumbs made Easy*, in a cheap form, with plates, and see to its general subterranean circulation. Only the "rudiments of a thumb and a minute nail"—it works on my sympathies.

He has a bushy tail, and is habited next the skin in a soft, woolly fur, mingled with which are coarse, long hairs, that project and form his outside covering, as you wear your pilot over broadcloth. His color was mentioned above; but in regard to color, size, weight, and other items, there rules a great variety. Audubon writes of one in his possession, from Lower Canada, that is "coal black, with the exception of the nose and a patch under the chin;" the like are to be found in New-York; and, though rarely, with us here in nether New-England. I know of one sleeping within a mile of me; and there he will sleep, sweetly, soundly, without turning over, till fruit-bearing spring comes again,

"And small foules maken melodie,"

as Chaucer sings; for he has no need to garner winter stores. Instead of laying up provision for the winter months, by a kind provision of nature, he lays himself up during the season when frost cuts off his supplies; for half the year, as Sam Weller says of the title of grandfather in his family, lies "dormouse"—careless of salt meats, independent of grocers. His posture, while enjoying this long slumber, is one of deep meditation—not unlike that of those ancients who sought beatific illumination by constant contemplation of the pits of their stomachs; or, perhaps, better, it is a pleasant emblem of the economical nature of his condition, that without painful thrift still makes both ends meet—the nose resting on the abdomen.

In the matter of habits, the woodchuck, as well as most other undomesticated animals, is more correct and regular than we, his self-styled betters. He does not guzzle, nor dive into, nor bolt his food, so grossly or rapidly as we are apt to do; consequently we do not hear of his dyspeptic troubles. We might draw valuable lessons in dietetics from his procedure. Stooping, he nips a stalk of clover, one of his favorite dishes—though he will eat on occasion other vegetables, and counts beans among the highest luxuries—and then rises, to masticate leisurely and appreciate its full relish. During the meal, he looks around, from time to time, to enjoy the landscape, and see if its beauties are not marred by the presence of some enemy. If any one tells you that he collects food in his pouched cheeks, as the squirrels do, withhold belief. Your informant may quote his books, and bring never so ingenious proofs, but the animal has no pouches to fill. Blessed with appetite and "good digestion," that best of waiters, the injury that he does to a clover field in the course of the summer, is more than you would at first expect from so small a forager. In addition to his consumption, he wastes as much more by trampling the grass and breaking the ground. So much for his eating, subjectively.

Objectively.—His flesh, though loose, is tender, and in good feeding season very fat. If laid in cold water ten or twelve hours before going to the fire,

it loses its earthy flavor, and when rightly cooked becomes a well-savored dish. My sole experience is of a white fricassee; I hear roasts and baked well spoken of.

His habitation is a long basement apartment, approached by a sloping entrance, and extending sometimes ten, sometimes forty feet; when dug on a plain field, it runs from one and a half to three feet under the surface. You sometimes find short ones, that are the work of youngsters, and are not inhabited—perhaps a mere baby-house work of imitation and juvenile amusement, at sight of which we may suppose the elders smile; perhaps an imposed exercise preparatory to mature digging and independent householding. Occasionally there is but one opening, but every prudent, well-to-do woodchuck digs from one to two rods, and makes two outlets. One of these is plainly marked by the excavated earth lying about it; the other is smaller, and concealed by the grass or leaves. Through this last he often makes good his retreat, while a canine or human enemy is mining at the other. There is generally but one gallery; but I broke into a burrow last autumn, full of windings, with a long side branch, and more than two entrances; it seemed to be a double burrow, and it may be, the children were living with the old folks instead of setting up a separate establishment, as they usually do. The earth thrown out does not appear nearly enough to have filled the excavation, nor can I get by observation or inquiry any satisfactory explanation of this curious disproportion. When I questioned Black Tom, he said, "they begin at the bottom and throw the dirt behind them." I have spoken of burrows in plain open fields. A more favorite location is under a rock, or a stone wall, or on a side hill, and in such cases the process of digging out the occupants is very difficult. Were it not for this, I would unearth the black specimen mentioned above (you won't mistake it for Tom.) and forward him to you by express; for in the dormant state he might be sent from here to Europe, like any inanimate parcel, be returned and deposited in his hole, and finally wake up none the wiser for his voyage, as has sometimes been the case with others who have made it; and none the worse, which has not always been the case with those who have made it. In winter they often lie in dry ledges.

His organs of hearing are very nice, and by their warning, he gets a long enough start of his enemy to countervail the shortness of his legs, which, however, compass the ground with a rapidity that you would not look for from their brevity, and to enable him to reach shelter before his pursuer. When too closely pressed, he turns on dog or man, and fights to the last, biting deeply. A blow with a stout stick across the back of the neck sets him at rest. During the summer, I had opportunity to deal but one such, though I often enough put myself in the way of it, as my letters of that time informed you.

In spite of their human likeness and good qualities, these woodchucks had worked too much evil in the fields; what with their eating of the vegetation, their breaking up of the soil, their tangling of the grass with their criss-cross paths, as definitively marked as if trampled by the march of men—too much, I say, that we could look upon it quietly. When going through the lots one day, I came upon fourteen main holes, down each of which a little of it dripping, my good nature, by the time I had passed the last of them, was clean exhausted, and I straightway resolved to be the death of some of the inmates. I thought to shoot them, and loaded the gun remarkably well; but when it came to the shooting part of the exercises, never was there an instance where the maxim, that it takes two to make a bargain, was more in point. The beasts had no correct notions of honor nor of discipline, and in place of waiting to be shot like Christian gentlemen and soldiers, they incontinently took to their heels, and these them to their cel-

lars, when they discovered my approach. Since open fight was out of the question, I tried a siege, and for three hours of a summer's afternoon sat near a hole, with the gun at my side, waiting for a mark to fire at, and meantime reading *Don Quixotte*. But Mundanus was either too cunning for me, or in careless innocence was taking his siesta, for I afterwards found that his kind are usually within doors at that time of the day. Their hours for going out are rather at morning and evening. Whether it was craft or chance, matters not, I saw not so much as the tip of his snout that day. Supper-time came, I closed the volume, uncapped the gun, and came back to the house, somewhat ruefully as you may suppose, and piqued that this troglodyte should thus outgeneral me with his masterly inactivity. My next plan was that of drowning; and finding the next day a domicile, where the rear and front doors were little distant, I brought some casks of water to bear upon them, and with the help of an associate, poured in one hundred gallons as fast as possible. The water soon met, from either end, in the middle of the gallery, and then flowed back to the surface. In a moment up came a head, but seeing your friend standing ready for him with uplifted hoe, instantly ducked and paddled through to the other outlet, now all exhaust, and retreating from the elemental war, reckless of opposition. "Look out," said I, to my helper, who was like armed as myself; "Now then, quick! have at him!" Slam went the hoe head, we exulting, straight down midst mud and water, on to the devoted, and then—bless your nostrils, what an unfragrancy! It was a skunk that had taken possession there and driven out the rightful tenant. This, in passing, is not an uncommon instance among the brute creation of holding by right of conquest. What is curious in this case is, that afterwards the burrow was re-occupied by the original proprietor, or one of his kin, whose bones now lie in the same, he having been done to death by a process before alluded to, and which, as you desire, I will presently detail more particularly. I had caught a Tartar, and was reminded of those lawsuits, to wit, the great majority of lawsuits, where the plaintiff wishes he had never begun, but being once in, must needs on. This ungrateful turn of affairs brought the water cure into bad odor with me. For the next trial I placed some powder and sulphur two or three feet within the mouth of a burrow, and then lighting a bunch of pine shavings, tied to the end of a stick, stooped down just to see where to direct it—the most natural movement in the world, you know, whereby, however, I suddenly became a less handsome man than usual, by reason of an especially brief set of eye-brows and eye-lashes.

It may be, that I, while sitting on a rock hard by, that caught me as I reeled backward, and rubbing off the crisped extremities of the charred hair, my eyes smarting, and, for the time, sightless, my organs of smelling oppressed with the fumes of burned meat, powder and brimstone—I hope not, Lemuel—I hope that, even under such suggestive circumstances, I did not commit that sin against good taste and good rhetoric, to say nothing of good morals—but it may be, that, perhaps, I then—used bad language. My memory does not accurately recall all the doings of those confused, vexed moments. I recollect that I was in a very expletive, imprecatory vein, and was filled with all grimness toward the *genus arctomys*. I am in quite a different mood now, and half-ashamed of that transient acerbity. With all their devouring and trampling, and digging, we have saved enough from a plentiful harvest for barn, pantry and cellar; and now, as I think of them, packed away in their snuggeries—they, too, so well provided for, slumbering there quietly till Pentecost. I remember that they had their right to the soil and its fruits; that the Scripture is always true—"the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." We Yankees are a

little apt to forget this, and claim all to ourselves. I have heard good people talk as though the starving strangers from Europe had no sort of right to crumbs that fall from our plentifully-spread table; no right to dig on our unused lands, and finally spread one of their own.

But to return to last August, and what I did and how I felt then. The week after the explosion, I looked into a book of chemistry, and found that chlorine gas was heavier than the atmospheric air, and destructive to animal life. Upon that hint I went to the druggist, and bought me chloride of lime and sulphuric acid; put half a pound of the lime into an old saucepan, and clapped it into the mouth of a burrow: covered all over save a space for the insertion of a lead pipe, through which I poured the acid. From the union of these two is generated the chlorine gas; and the ill flavor of the combats between St. Dustan and the adversary, of which we laughingly read in Southey's ballad, must have been as attar of roses, in comparison. Novelists sometimes stop in the midst of an ecstatic scene, with the flattering remark to the reader, that his imagination can finish it more accurately than their power of description. This odor of chlorine gas is something that your imagination, dear Lem., can no way compass. It must be a foul imagination that could. To use again one of those convenient substitute phrases, that take the place of further mental effort—"It must be felt to be appreciated." I had finally hit upon the right method of destruction, and three, at least, of the groundlings, because of it, lie dead as Julius Cæsar, or any other hero.

The last time that I charged the saucepan, it was against an impudent varlet of a *monax*, who would show himself, rioting among the rankly growing crop, or sitting up on his ——, I mean just as we humans do, and as our quadrupedal fellow-beings ordinarily do not, and would apparently quiz me, while I watched him from the window. But as surely as I went down stairs and out after him, he was as clear gone as your last night's good resolutions. But the heavy fumes reached him in his very penetrabilia. With all its cunning windings and stout side walls, his strong hold could not protect him. He, like the rest, must yield a victim to the advances of modern science.

I may add to what is written above, that, here in New-England, at least, the marmotts are not gregarious, though several burrows may be found near together. Their western relatives are found in large numbers; and travellers, supposed to be fanciful, speak of them as forming communities, with set watchmen to give notice of hostile approaches. Naturalists advise us lately not to believe these travellers. With us a full grown specimen measures about a foot and a half in length; if you include the tail, two feet, and weighs about ten pounds. The female, in early summer, brings forth her young "four or five in number," though families—it may be poor clerical woodchucks that are so blessed—of eight are recorded. As nature's agent, she takes the kind care and displays the same parental solicitude to which we all owe so much, and which young woodchucks in a few months are able to dispense with and do straightway forget, wherein—changing the length of time of course—lies the last trait of similitude that I will indicate, between the *genus arctomys* and the *genus homo*. I have drawn my letter to an unreasonably wearisome length, I fear, for I have again fallen into this bad habit of night writing, that was only excusable in the fine season, when the glorious outdoor light and life were too good to be shut out by four walls—a "sullessness against nature," that I am rarely guilty of between May and November. "The huntsmen are up in Arabia; and they have already passed their first sleep in Persia;" and with all good wishes, dear Lemuel, I extinguish my epistle.

Yours, always, C. R. B.