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Produced by Donald Lainson, and David Widger

FISHERMAN'S LUCK AND SOME OTHER UNCERTAIN THINGS

by Henry van Dyke

"Now I conclude that not only in Physicke, but likewise in sundry more certaine arts, fortune hath great share in them."

M. DE MONTAIGNE: Divers Events.

DEDICATION TO MY LADY GRAYGOWN

Here is the basket; I bring it home to you. There are no great fish in it. But perhaps there may be one or two little ones which will be to your taste. And there are a few shining pebbles from the bed of the brook, and ferns from the cool, green woods, and wild flowers from the places that you remember. I would fain console you, if I could, for the hardship of having married an angler: a man who relapses into his mania with the return of every spring, and never sees a little river without wishing to fish in it. But after all, we have had good times together as we have followed the stream of life towards the sea. And we have passed through the dark days without losing heart, because we were comrades. So let this book tell you one thing that is certain. In all the life of your fisherman the best piece of luck is just YOU.

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FISHERMAN'S LUCK

Has it ever fallen in your way to notice the quality of the greetings that belong to certain occupations?

There is something about these salutations in kind which is singularly taking and grateful to the ear. They are as much better than an ordinary “good day” or a flat “how are you?” as a folk-song of Scotland or the Tyrol is better than the futile love-ditty of the drawing-room. They have a spicy and rememberable flavour. They speak to the imagination and point the way to treasure-trove.

There is a touch of dignity in them, too, for all they are so free and easy—the dignity of independence, the native spirit of one who takes for granted that his mode of living has a right to make its own forms of speech. I admire a man who does not hesitate to salute the world in the dialect of his calling.

How salty and stimulating, for example, is the sailorman’s hail of “Ship ahoy!” It is like a breeze laden with briny odours and a pleasant dash of spray. The miners in some parts of Germany have a good greeting for their dusky trade. They cry to one who is going down the shaft, “Gluck auf!” All the perils of an underground adventure and all the joys of seeing the sun again are compressed into a word. Even the trivial salutation which the telephone has lately created and claimed for its peculiar use—“Hello, hello”—seems to me to have a kind of fitness and fascination. It is like a thoroughbred bulldog, ugly enough to be attractive. There is a lively, concentrated, electric air about it. It makes courtesy wait upon dispatch, and reminds us that we live in an age when it is necessary to be wide awake.

I have often wished that every human employment might evolve its own appropriate greeting. Some of them would be queer, no doubt; but at least they would be an improvement on the wearisome iteration of “Good-evening” and “Good-morning,” and the monotonous inquiry, “How do you do?”—a question so meaningless that it seldom tarries for an answer. Under the new and more natural system of etiquette, when you passed the time of day with a man you would know his business, and the salutations of the market-place would be full of interest.

As for my chosen pursuit of angling (which I follow with diligence when not interrupted by less important concerns), I rejoice with every true fisherman that it has a greeting all its own and of a most honourable antiquity. There is no written record of its origin. But it is quite certain that since the days after the Flood, when Deucalion

“Did first this art invent
Of angling, and his people taught the same,”

two honest and good-natured anglers have never met each other by the way without crying out, “What luck?”

Here, indeed, is an epitome of the gentle art. Here is the spirit of it

embodied in a word and paying its respects to you with its native accent. Here you see its secret charms unconsciously disclosed. The attraction of angling for all the ages of man, from the cradle to the grave, lies in its uncertainty. 'Tis an affair of luck.

No amount of preparation in the matter of rods and lines and hooks and lures and nets and creels can change its essential character. No excellence of skill in casting the delusive fly or adjusting the tempting bait upon the hook can make the result secure. You may reduce the chances, but you cannot eliminate them. There are a thousand points at which fortune may intervene. The state of the weather, the height of the water, the appetite of the fish, the presence or absence of other anglers—all these indeterminable elements enter into the reckoning of your success. There is no combination of stars in the firmament by which you can forecast the piscatorial future. When you go a-fishing, you just take your chances; you offer yourself as a candidate for anything that may be going; you try your luck.

There are certain days that are favourites among anglers, who regard them as propitious for the sport. I know a man who believes that the fish always rise better on Sunday than on any other day in the week. He complains bitterly of this supposed fact, because his religious scruples will not allow him to take advantage of it. He confesses that he has sometimes thought seriously of joining the Seventh-Day Baptists.

Among the Pennsylvania Dutch, in the Alleghany Mountains, I have found a curious tradition that Ascension Day is the luckiest in the year for fishing. On that morning the district school is apt to be thinly attended, and you must be on the stream very early if you do not wish to find wet footprints on the stones ahead of you.

But in fact, all these superstitions about fortunate days are idle and presumptuous. If there were such days in the calendar, a kind and firm Providence would never permit the race of man to discover them. It would rob life of one of its principal attractions, and make fishing altogether too easy to be interesting.

Fisherman's luck is so notorious that it has passed into a proverb. But the fault with that familiar saying is that it is too short and too narrow to cover half the variations of the angler's possible experience. For if his luck should be bad, there is no portion of his anatomy, from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, that may not be thoroughly wet. But if it should be good, he may receive an unearned blessing of abundance not only in his basket, but also in his head and his heart, his memory and his fancy. He may come home from some obscure, ill-named, lovely stream—some Dry Brook, or Southwest Branch of Smith's Run—with a creel full of trout, and a mind full of grateful

recollections of flowers that seemed to bloom for his sake, and birds that sang a new, sweet, friendly message to his tired soul. He may climb down to "Tommy's Rock" below the cliffs at Newport (as I have done many a day with my lady Greygown), and, all unnoticed by the idle, weary promenaders in the path of fashion, haul in a basketful of blackfish, and at the same time look out across the shining sapphire waters and inherit a wondrous good fortune of dreams—

"Have glimpses that will make him less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea,
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn."

But all this, you must remember, depends upon something secret and incalculable, something that we can neither command nor predict. It is an affair of gift, not of wages. Fish (and the other good things which are like sauce to the catching of them) cast no shadow before. Water is the emblem of instability. No one can tell what he shall draw out of it until he has taken in his line. Herein are found the true charm and profit of angling for all persons of a pure and childlike mind.

Look at those two venerable gentlemen floating in a skiff upon the clear waters of Lake George. One of them is a successful statesman, an ex-President of the United States, a lawyer versed in all the curious eccentricities of the "lawless science of the law." The other is a learned doctor of medicine, able to give a name to all diseases from which men have imagined that they suffered, and to invent new ones for those who are tired of vulgar maladies. But all their learning is forgotten, their cares and controversies are laid aside, in "innocuous desuetude." The Summer School of Sociology is assembled. The Medical Congress is in session.

But they care not—no, not so much as the value of a single live bait. The sun shines upon them with a fervent heat, but it irks them not. The rain descends, and the winds blow and beat upon them, but they are unmoved. They are securely anchored here in the lee of Sabbath-Day Point.

What enchantment binds them to that inconsiderable spot? What magic fixes their eyes upon the point of a fishing-rod, as if it were the finger of destiny? It is the enchantment of uncertainty: the same natural magic that draws the little suburban boys in the spring of the year, with their strings and pin-hooks, around the shallow ponds where dace and redfins hide; the same irresistible charm that fixes a row of city gamins, like ragged and disreputable fish-crows, on the end of a pier where blear-eyed flounders sometimes lurk in the muddy water. Let the philosopher explain it as he will. Let the moralist reprehend it as he chooses. There is nothing that attracts human nature more powerfully than the sport of tempting the unknown with a fishing-line.

Those ancient anglers have set out upon an exodus from the tedious realm of the definite, the fixed, the must-certainly-come-to-pass. They are on a holiday in the free country of peradventure. They do not know at this moment whether the next turn of Fortune's reel will bring up a perch or a pickerel, a sunfish or a black bass. It may be a hideous catfish or a squirming eel, or it may be a lake-trout, the grand prize in the Lake George lottery. There they sit, those gray-haired lads, full of hope, yet equally prepared for resignation; taking no thought for the morrow, and ready to make the best of to-day; harmless and happy players at the best of all games of chance.

"In other words," I hear some severe and sour-complexioned reader say, "in plain language, they are a pair of old gamblers."

Yes, if it pleases you to call honest men by a bad name. But they risk nothing that is not their own; and if they lose, they are not impoverished. They desire nothing that belongs to other men; and if they win, no one is robbed. If all gambling were like that, it would be difficult to see the harm in it. Indeed, a daring moralist might even assert, and prove by argument, that so innocent a delight in the taking of chances is an aid to virtue.

Do you remember Martin Luther's reasoning on the subject of "excellent large pike"? He maintains that God would never have created them so good to the taste, if He had not meant them to be eaten. And for the same reason I conclude that this world would never have been left so full of uncertainties, nor human nature framed so as to find a peculiar joy and exhilaration in meeting them bravely and cheerfully, if it had not been divinely intended that most of our amusement and much of our education should come from this source.

"Chance" is a disreputable word, I know. It is supposed by many pious persons to be improper and almost blasphemous to use it. But I am not one of those who share this verbal prejudice. I am inclined rather to believe that it is a good word to which a bad reputation has been given. I feel grateful to that admirable "psychologist who writes like a novelist," Mr. William James, for his brilliant defence of it. For what does it mean, after all, but that some things happen in a certain way which might have happened in another way? Where is the immorality, the irreverence, the atheism in such a supposition? Certainly God must be competent to govern a world in which there are possibilities of various kinds, just as well as one in which every event is inevitably determined beforehand. St. Peter and the other fishermen-disciples on the Lake of Galilee were perfectly free to cast their net on either side of the ship. So far as they could see, so far as any one could see, it was a matter of chance where they chose to cast it. But it was not until they let it down, at the Master's word, on the right side that they had good luck. And not the least

element of their joy in the draft of fishes was that it brought a change of fortune.

Leave the metaphysics of the question on the table for the present. As a matter of fact, it is plain that our human nature is adapted to conditions variable, undetermined, and hidden from our view. We are not fitted to live in a world where $a + b$ always equals c , and there is nothing more to follow. The interest of life's equation arrives with the appearance of x , the unknown quantity. A settled, unchangeable, clearly foreseeable order of things does not suit our constitution. It tends to melancholy and a fatty heart. Creatures of habit we are undoubtedly; but it is one of our most fixed habits to be fond of variety. The man who is never surprised does not know the taste of happiness, and unless the unexpected sometimes happens to us, we are most grievously disappointed.

Much of the tediousness of highly civilized life comes from its smoothness and regularity. To-day is like yesterday, and we think that we can predict to-morrow. Of course we cannot really do so. The chances are still there. But we have covered them up so deeply with the artificialities of life that we lose sight of them. It seems as if everything in our neat little world were arranged, and provided for, and reasonably sure to come to pass. The best way of escape from this *TAEDIUM VITAE* is through a recreation like angling, not only because it is so evidently a matter of luck, but also because it tempts us into a wilder, freer life. It leads almost inevitably to camping out, which is a wholesome and sanitary imprudence.

It is curious and pleasant, to my apprehension, to observe how many people in New England, one of whose States is called "the land of Steady Habits," are sensible of the joy of changing them,—out of doors. These good folk turn out from their comfortable farm-houses and their snug suburban cottages to go a-gypsying for a fortnight among the mountains or beside the sea. You see their white tents gleaming from the pine-groves around the little lakes, and catch glimpses of their bathing-clothes drying in the sun on the wiry grass that fringes the sand-dunes. Happy fugitives from the bondage of routine! They have found out that a long journey is not necessary to a good vacation. You may reach the Forest of Arden in a buckboard. The Fortunate Isles are within sailing distance in a dory. And a voyage on the river Pactolus is open to any one who can paddle a canoe.

I was talking—or rather listening—with a barber, the other day, in the sleepy old town of Rivermouth. He told me, in one of those easy confidences which seem to make the razor run more smoothly, that it had been the custom of his family, for some twenty years past, to forsake their commodious dwelling on Anchor Street every summer, and emigrate six miles, in a wagon

to Wallis Sands, where they spent the month of August very merrily under canvas. Here was a sensible household for you! They did not feel bound to waste a year's income on a four weeks' holiday. They were not of those foolish folk who run across the sea, carefully carrying with them the same tiresome mind that worried them at home. They got a change of air by making an alteration of life. They escaped from the land of Egypt by stepping out into the wilderness and going a-fishing.

The people who always live in houses, and sleep on beds, and walk on pavements, and buy their food from butchers and bakers and grocers, are not the most blessed inhabitants of this wide and various earth. The circumstances of their existence are too mathematical and secure for perfect contentment. They live at second or third hand. They are boarders in the world. Everything is done for them by somebody else.

It is almost impossible for anything very interesting to happen to them. They must get their excitement out of the newspapers, reading of the hairbreadth escapes and moving accidents that befall people in real life. What do these tame ducks really know of the adventure of living? If the weather is bad, they are snugly housed. If it is cold, there is a furnace in the cellar. If they are hungry, the shops are near at hand. It is all as dull, flat, stale, and unprofitable as adding up a column of figures. They might as well be brought up in an incubator.

But when man abides in tents, after the manner of the early patriarchs, the face of the world is renewed. The vagaries of the clouds become significant. You watch the sky with a lover's look, eager to know whether it will smile or frown. When you lie at night upon your bed of boughs and hear the rain pattering on the canvas close above your head, you wonder whether it is a long storm or only a shower.

The rising wind shakes the tent-flaps. Are the pegs well driven down and the cords firmly fastened? You fall asleep again and wake later, to hear the rain drumming still more loudly on the tight cloth, and the big breeze snoring through the forest, and the waves plunging along the beach. A stormy day? Well, you must cut plenty of wood and keep the camp-fire glowing, for it will be hard to start it up again, if you let it get too low. There is little use in fishing or hunting in such a storm. But there is plenty to do in the camp: guns to be cleaned, tackle to be put in order, clothes to be mended, a good story of adventure to be read, a belated letter to be written to some poor wretch in a summer hotel, a game of hearts or cribbage to be played, or a hunting-trip to be planned for the return of fair weather. The tent is perfectly dry. A little trench dug around it carries off the surplus water, and luckily it is pitched with the side to the lake, so that you get the pleasant heat of the fire without the

unendurable smoke. Cooking in the rain has its disadvantages. But how good the supper tastes when it is served up on a tin plate, with an empty box for a table and a roll of blankets at the foot of the bed for a seat!

A day, two days, three days, the storm may continue, according to your luck. I have been out in the woods for a fortnight without a drop of rain or a sign of dust. Again, I have tented on the shore of a big lake for a week, waiting for an obstinate tempest to pass by.

Look now, just at nightfall: is there not a little lifting and breaking of the clouds in the west, a little shifting of the wind toward a better quarter? You go to bed with cheerful hopes. A dozen times in the darkness you are half awake, and listening drowsily to the sounds of the storm. Are they waxing or waning? Is that louder pattering a new burst of rain, or is it only the plumping of the big drops as they are shaken from the trees? See, the dawn has come, and the gray light glimmers through the canvas. In a little while you will know your fate.

Look! There is a patch of bright yellow radiance on the peak of the tent. The shadow of a leaf dances over it. The sun must be shining. Good luck! and up with you, for it is a glorious morning.

The woods are glistening as fresh and fair as if they had been new-created overnight. The water sparkles, and tiny waves are dancing and splashing all along the shore. Scarlet berries of the mountain-ash hang around the lake. A pair of kingfishers dart back and forth across the bay, in flashes of living blue. A black eagle swings silently around his circle, far up in the cloudless sky. The air is full of pleasant sounds, but there is no noise. The world is full of joyful life, but there is no crowd and no confusion. There is no factory chimney to darken the day with its smoke, no trolley-car to split the silence with its shriek and smite the indignant ear with the clanging of its impudent bell. No lumberman's axe has robbed the encircling forests of their glory of great trees. No fires have swept over the hills and left behind them the desolation of a bristly landscape. All is fresh and sweet, calm and clear and bright.

'Twas rather a rude jest of Nature, that tempest of yesterday. But if you have taken it in good part, you are all the more ready for her caressing mood to-day. And now you must be off to get your dinner—not to order it at a shop, but to look for it in the woods and waters. You are ready to do your best with rod or gun. You will use all the skill you have as hunter or fisherman. But what you shall find, and whether you shall subsist on bacon and biscuit, or feast on trout and partridges, is, after all, a matter of luck.

I profess that it appears to me not only pleasant, but also salutary, to be in

this condition. It brings us home to the plain realities of life; it teaches us that a man ought to work before he eats; it reminds us that, after he has done all he can, he must still rely upon a mysterious bounty for his daily bread. It says to us, in homely and familiar words, that life was meant to be uncertain, that no man can tell what a day will bring forth, and that it is the part of wisdom to be prepared for disappointments and grateful for all kinds of small mercies.

There is a story in that fragrant book, THE LITTLE FLOWERS OF ST. FRANCIS, which I wish to transcribe here, without tying a moral to it, lest any one should accuse me of preaching.

“Hence [says the quaint old chronicler], having assigned to his companions the other parts of the world, St. Francis, taking Brother Maximus as his comrade, set forth toward the province of France. And coming one day to a certain town, and being very hungry, they begged their bread as they went, according to the rule of their order, for the love of God. And St. Francis went through one quarter of the town, and Brother Maximus through another. But forasmuch as St. Francis was a man mean and low of stature, and hence was reputed a vile beggar by such as knew him not, he only received a few scanty crusts and mouthfuls of dry bread. But to Brother Maximus, who was large and well favoured, were given good pieces and big, and an abundance of bread, yea, whole loaves. Having thus begged, they met together without the town to eat, at a place where there was a clear spring and a fair large stone, upon which each spread forth the gifts that he had received. And St. Francis, seeing that the pieces of bread begged by Brother Maximus were bigger and better than his own, rejoiced greatly, saying, ‘Oh, Brother Maximus, we are not worthy of so great a treasure.’ As he repeated these words many times, Brother Maximus made answer: ‘Father, how can you talk of treasures when there is such great poverty and such lack of all things needful? Here is neither napkin nor knife, neither board nor trencher, neither house nor table, neither man-servant nor maid-servant.’ St. Francis replied: ‘And this is what I reckon a great treasure, where naught is made ready by human industry, but all that is here is prepared by Divine Providence, as is plainly set forth in the bread which we have begged, in the table of fair stone, and in the spring of clear water. And therefore I would that we should pray to God that He teach us with all our hearts to love the treasure of holy poverty, which is so noble a thing, and whose servant is God the Lord.’”

I know of but one fairer description of a repast in the open air; and that is where we are told how certain poor fishermen, coming in very weary after a night of toil (and one of them very wet after swimming ashore), found their Master standing on the bank of the lake waiting for them. But it seems that he must have been busy in their behalf while he was waiting; for there was a

bright fire of coals burning on the shore, and a goodly fish broiling thereon, and bread to eat with it. And when the Master had asked them about their fishing, he said, "Come, now, and get your breakfast." So they sat down around the fire, and with his own hands he served them with the bread and the fish.

Of all the banquets that have ever been given upon earth, that is the one in which I would rather have had a share.

But it is now time that we should return to our fishing. And let us observe with gratitude that almost all of the pleasures that are connected with this pursuit—its accompaniments and variations, which run along with the tune and weave an embroidery of delight around it—have an accidental and gratuitous quality about them. They are not to be counted upon beforehand. They are like something that is thrown into a purchase by a generous and open-handed dealer, to make us pleased with our bargain and inclined to come back to the same shop.

If I knew, for example, before setting out for a day on the brook, precisely what birds I should see, and what pretty little scenes in the drama of woodland life were to be enacted before my eyes, the expedition would lose more than half its charm. But, in fact, it is almost entirely a matter of luck, and that is why it never grows tiresome.

The ornithologist knows pretty well where to look for the birds, and he goes directly to the places where he can find them, and proceeds to study them intelligently and systematically. But the angler who idles down the stream takes them as they come, and all his observations have a flavour of surprise in them.

He hears a familiar song,—one that he has often heard at a distance, but never identified,—a loud, cheery, rustic cadence sounding from a low pine-tree close beside him. He looks up carefully through the needles and discovers a hooded warbler, a tiny, restless creature, dressed in green and yellow, with two white feathers in its tail, like the ends of a sash, and a glossy little black bonnet drawn closely about its golden head. He will never forget that song again. It will make the woods seem homelike to him, many a time, as he hears it ringing through the afternoon, like the call of a small country girl playing at hide-and-seek: "See ME; here I BE."

Another day he sits down on a mossy log beside a cold, trickling spring to eat his lunch. It has been a barren day for birds. Perhaps he has fallen into the fault of pursuing his sport too intensely, and tramped along the stream looking for nothing but fish. Perhaps this part of the grove has really been deserted by its feathered inhabitants, scared away by a prowling hawk or driven out by