

“I Was Too Lazy to Roast What I Took in Hunting”

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[Whyte, Alexander. *James Fraser Laird of Brea Parish Minister of Culross Bass Rock, Blackness, and New-Gate Prisoner, and Author of ‘The Book of the Intricacies of my Heart and Life’*. Edinburgh; London: Published by Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1890]

Solomon has Esau in his eye in the twelfth of the Proverbs. Esau was a very successful hunter, but then he was much too lazy to roast what he took in his hunting. Many was the dish of savory venison that Esau shot down with his weapons and that Rebekah then took and roasted and served up to old Isaac. And Isaac ate of his son’s venison, and said as he ate: “See, the smell of my son Esau is as the smell of a field that the Lord hath blessed.” Esau was not lazy in the hunt, only he would not take the trouble to roast what he had hunted. No not even when he was like to faint with hunger after a long day’s success in the chase. Rather than light a fire in the field and then skin and gut and wash and roast and make ready his venison: rather than do all that for himself with his own hands Esau was willing to pay any price that Jacob demanded for the tempting dish of pottage that Jacob had got ready for his own supper that night. Esau paid such a tremendous price for that smoking dish that a New Testament apostle says to all spiritually slothful men among ourselves, “Lest there be any profane person among you, as Esau, who, for one morsel of meat, sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterwards when he would have inherited the blessing he was rejected, for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.”

To begin with: one of our divinity students will be sitting with his feet on the fender and reading some of the masterpieces. And as he reads he comes, let us say, on Augustine concerning Cicero and the eleventh of Matthew; or on Luther concerning the righteousness of Christ in Romans and in Galatians; or on Hooker concerning Peter’s fall and repentance; or he is reading *Measure for Measure*, when he comes on Isabella’s splendid apostrophe concerning Him who is the top of judgment; or on Milton concerning the *Temptation in the Wilderness*; or on Coleridge concerning prayer. But our student sits still and reads on. Instead of rising from his seat and going to his desk and taking up his pen and opening his interleaved Bible and there setting down all those arguments and illustrations which are now due by him to his Bible and to his future pulpit, our young Esau has had the exhilaration of the hunt, but he has not taken the trouble to roast what he has hunted: he has not taken care that he shall have all the best results of his reading ready to hand when his future work shall need it all. There is an excitement and a delight in hunting that there is not in roasting. And there is an excitement, and a delight in sitting and reading on and on in a good book that there is not in rising up and securing by our own pen and ink what we have just read. But without taking such security on the spot a great deal of what we read is completely lost and cannot be recovered when our pulpit and our prayer meeting and our class would all be interested and enriched and edified by means of it. Without roasting, and all the other operations and processes connected with roasting, you cannot eat so as to take your needed strength out of what you have hunted. And no more can you without annotating and arranging and indexing your reading really make your own what you have read: however good, and however worthy to be remembered your reading may be. “It must be added,” says Canon Mozley, “that Newman did the same. He drew up a summary and an analysis of any book he

read.” And Lord Morley says of Mr. Gladstone: “On those Sundays he read Chillingworth and Jewel, and above all he dug and delved in Augustine. And he was no reader of the lounging, sauntering species; he went forward on a sedulous process of import and export; his was a mind always actively at work on all the matters that passed before it.”

Then, again, your experienced hunter does not rent again for next season the hills on which he found no deer last season; nor does he rent again the moors nor the woods in which he found no partridges nor pheasants nor hares. And no more does a true student waste his money and his time on those disappointing volumes that supply him with nothing for his Bible and his notebook and his pulpit. Bishop Butler warns his readers against all those books that are “no books”: and against “the too many books and papers of mere amusement.” “By such books,” he says, “time is happily got rid of without the pain of attention. Neither is any part of our time more to be put to the account of idleness than great part of that time which is spent in so-called reading. In this way,” he adds, “people habituate themselves to let things pass through their minds, rather than think of them. Review and attention become fatigue; and to lay anything before them that requires review and attention is putting them quite out of their way.” “During this time,” writes our present autobiographer, “I lived in divers sins: and neglecting my books and misspending my time was one of those sins, and that was the cause of some other sins.” And of James Durham, a famous contemporary of Fraser’s, our divinity students are told that “so weighty was his pulpit upon Durham’s mind that he was wont to say if he had ten years longer to live, he would give nine of those years to hard study and would then on the tenth year come forth to preach.”

And, then, meditation: deep and long and close meditation is but so much immediate roasting of what we have just hunted down. Simple meditation sometimes is equal to so much copying out and indexing, and that without rising from our seat and without putting a pen to paper. And old hands at meditation know instinctively and immediately just what things to take into their minds and hearts at the moment, and just what things to commit to pen and paper against the time to come. And all such old and experienced students are constantly “finding tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.” Like Luther: “At the Wartburg I followed the chase two days last week in order to get a taste of the pleasures that our fine gentlemen are so set upon. We caught two hares and a few poor roes. Truly a worthy occupation for idle men! Amid the nets and the dogs I pondered over some theological matters. I could not but feel sad at the deep mysteries that lay concealed under the gay scene. I managed to save a poor hare and hid her under my coat. But the dogs discovered her and bit her leg through my coat and choked her till she died. And thus do Satan and his dogs bite and kill the souls of men.” And again: “Grace and peace, my honored sir! When I was with you lately you did me the honor to take me with you to the hunt to try if the dizziness in my head might be dispelled by the fresh air and the exercise. As I sat in the carriage I went out on a spiritual chase and expounded to myself the 147th Psalm, which became to me the most delightful hunting-ground in which I ran down the noblest game. And having brought it home and having worked it out I send you what I got on your ground. Such game is wonderfully adapted for distribution among friends, for each receives the whole and no one is defrauded.” That is how the great Reformer roasted what he took in his hunting.

And then our preaching and your hearing is just so much hunting and then roasting: or, if

so be, so much hunting and not roasting. And therefore do not go away this evening saying to yourself and to others that the hunting turned out so poor today that there was nothing for you and your household to roast when you went home from the Sabbath chase. The poorest sermon you ever heard, I warrant you, had much more in it than you had the grace to take home. It is very poor cover where a good shot does not get a rabbit or two to take home and send down to the cook in the kitchen. Take them at their very best, your very best preachers are but so many gamekeepers and bush beaters, whose whole office it is to bring the divine quarry within reach of your guns. But after the best keeper and the best beater has done his best for you and yours, you must attend better to what you hear than you have yet done, and you must take what you hear home with you better than you have yet done, and you must meditate more and better on what you have heard than you have yet done. And instead of exalting yourself before your children and in the hearing of your servants at the expense of the preacher, you must humble yourself to praise every sermon you hear and to point out to them its great qualities. And when your son, looking up to you, says to you, "Father, was that a good sermon?" always say - at any rate till your son is grown up and is able to judge for himself - always say to him what John Keble's father said to the future author of *The Christian Year*, "My son," said the wise old man, "all sermons are good." I know a father in Edinburgh - I will not say in this congregation - who so systematically ran down his ministers at every Sabbath-day meal that his dutiful son gradually and at last gave over going to church altogether. How it will turn out and end between that father and that son I am waiting to see. The truth is, my brethren, you might have Paul in this pulpit in the morning and Apollos in the evening, but if you did not pray all the way up to your pew and all the way down, the chiefest of the apostles, nay, the very master of the Apostles Himself, would be but a savor of death to you and to your household: as He actually was to many censorious churchgoers in Jerusalem. "O," exclaims Thomas Shepard on the same subject, "O! never shall you see any soul careful and teachable but he finds something for his salvation in every sermon."

Our old fellow-townsmen and fine student of letters, Dr. Hill Burton, has a delightful volume entitled *The Book Hunter*. And there are some men among us who are most successful hunters of old liturgies, and old litanies, and old prayer-books. They have possessed themselves of all the rarest editions of all the best devotional books in the whole world. They are known to have Maskell, and Palmer, and Neale, and Hammond at their fingers' ends. And they will be proud to let you see the most beautifully bound and the most stainless copies of the *Confessions* and the *Soliloquies*, as also of Jacob Behmen's *Holy Week*, and Jeremy Taylor's *Golden Grove*. Andrewes also and Laud and Wilson and the priceless prayer-books of Edward and Elizabeth. And I will wager that at this moment both Mr. Thin in this city, and Mr. Baker in London, have orders on their books to be on the outlook for such and such a rarity of devotion, at any price. But when our prayer-book hunter again gets his heart's desire, what does he do with it? You would say that he will watch with it at least one hour on the night after he has got possession of the gem. I am not so sure as you are about that. At any rate he will keep you an hour with your mouth watering at the sight and at the cost of his treasures, and at the hunt he has had for them. Says old Shepard again about such a prayer-book hunter in New England: "Though he has tasted the sweetness of the literature of prayer, there are times when he will risk death itself than take his prayer-book with him to his knees."

To sum up in one word, and that one word is *sloth*. Sloth in the spiritual life is the last sin to be wholly overcome. "The sloth and unprofitableness of my life," wrote Manning, "are only equaled by my vanity and self-complacency." Now, to be true and to be plain on this matter with you all - I often wonder as I go on working among you if any of you ever attach any meaning or make any application to yourselves of those so urgent counsels and commands of which the Word of God is full. Those commands to be up and doing! To be on your watch-tower of prayer night and day! - Sabbath and Saturday. To fight the good fight of faith every day! To hold the fort every day! To endure unto death! And, never, for one moment, to be found off your guard! What about all that? What does all that, or any single part of that mean in your individual case? Does it mean anything at all? Anything at all? The Captain of your salvation has not forgotten what all that meant for Him and what it all cost Him. Against what, then, do you fight in His strength? What fort do you hold in His name? Sloth, ugly word as it is, is it not the true name for most men's lives of religion among us? But to come back to Brea and to close with him. "I hereupon find a great reluctance and resistance to all manner of spiritual duties. There is no truly spiritual duty about which I go, but I find my indwelling sinfulness ready to oppose and hinder me in it. And I get nothing of that kind done but over mountains of difficulties. For one thing, what an omnipotent work it is to pray aright and to pray enough. Oh! my sloth! Oh! my sloth!" Oh! our sloth also, all you, my friends! Our sloth in secret reading of the Word of God! Our sloth in meditating on what we read and what we hear. And, as all God's people will tell you, our sloth in secret prayer. "Oh!" cries Calvin, "What deep-seated malice against God is this, that I will do anything, and everything, but go to Him and remain with Him in secret prayer!" "Our sloth," exclaims another Calvinist, "And our sheer stupidity in secret prayer, is surely the last proof of our fall; of the depth of it, and of the uttermost misery of it!" How many of you have ever cast off your inborn sloth of spirit, and have ever given your whole soul to secret prayer? To prayer, say, like Jacob's, after his sin had found him out at the Jabbok? To prayer, say, like our Lord's, when our sin had found Him out in Gethsemane? To prayer, say, like Coleridge's, when his sin had found him out in his broken-down old age? Take Coleridge on his death-bed. "My difficulty is to pray," the philosopher said to his nephew. "It is to pray as God would have me to pray, this is what turns me cold in my soul. Believe me, to pray with your whole heart and strength, with your whole reason and your whole will, and to believe, without doubting, that God, through Christ, will listen to your prayer, believe me, that is the last and the greatest achievement of the Christian's warfare on this earth. Lord, teach us to pray! And then he burst into a flood of tears, and begged me to pray for him."

And now, O thou who hearest prayer, let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart concerning our hunting and our roasting in reading, and in writing, and in meditation, and in preaching, and in hearing, and in praying, let it all be acceptable in Thy sight, and profitable to Thy people, O my Lord, my Strength, and my Redeemer. Amen.