



THE SPIDER-CRAB.

THOUGHTS ON A CRAB.



WRITER in "Appleton's Journal" discourses thus jocosely on the crab:—

The moment he is out of his old house he swells himself; he assumes all the rotundity that the utmost possible consumption of water will attain. This is not out of pride at the extraordinary feat he has just accomplished, but as a precautionary measure for the future. Upon his size now depends the size of his new coat which tailor Nature is making and fitting for him, and he must leave room for all the good dinners he intends to eat for the next many months. Once encased again in his fresh garments, he will have no further chance to expand except by another revolution like the one he has just gone through. Having swollen, he lies still till his coat hardens into mail, which it does in a few days. At this time occurs another strange event which no man has successfully explained.

A hard crab is very frequently seen swimming with a soft one in his arms; now, the reason for this is something that "no fellow has found out." It may be love or it may be hunger; it may be that the hard shell means to make the soft shell a partner of his bosom or his stomach; he or she holds the other strained to his or her breast, so that when one is captured, the other is taken; and it has been observed that the two are generally, if not invariably, of different sex. So this strange romance may be founded, like so many human ones, on "the old, old story," or it may be but a repetition of a still older story reaching way back to the days of Adam immediately on his expulsion from paradise, the struggle for life. As our great poet Joaquin Miller so beautifully sings:

"O master dear, I greatly fear
Our 'crab' will come to harm,
For I saw last night the 'hard crab'
With the 'soft crab' on its arm!"

This eccentricity may therefore signify the end of that soft crab, or it may intimate the beginning of a long line of both soft and hard crabs extending down "through all the generations." For, after all, crabs are but mortal, and are dominated by the power of love and hunger like human beings; they may have wonderful gifts, but they are subject to a common fate, and food and folly fill as much of their lives as they do of man's.

We all know the famous definition of a crab, that it was a "red fish that went backward," and the criticism to the effect that there were only three errors in the explanation, as a crab was neither red, nor a fish, nor did it go backward. But this is over-nicety. The best part of a crab's existence, if not of his life, is when he is red—for only after he is cooked do most of our race know him. By heat he turns from greyish-green to radiant red; he is purified and improved by fire. The most sceptical will admit that, if he is not absolutely a fish, a scale-fish, with the flesh outside and the bones inside, he is a sort of fish, a "variation," as science terms it, a shell-fish, which, in its eccentric and perhaps sensible nature, prefers to wear the bones outside and keep the flesh safely housed within.

Moreover, if the ichthyologically book-learned were required to define accurately and positively what a fish is, and to determine if they would include whales equally with sticklebacks and the viviparous species of the California coast with the flying-fish and the dolphins, and if they would accept the curious double-eyed species of the West Indies, which have one-half of the optic lens adapted to looking through the atmosphere and the other half for use under water, they would certainly experience trouble in keeping out of so large and liberal a class our persevering and interesting subject, the crab. And, as to his mode of progression, did not so great and fishy

an authority as the "melancholy Dane" in Shakespeare say, "If, like a crab, you could go backward?" Taking all this together, therefore, it is not surprising that a crab should carry some of his obliquities with him, even into a dictionary. He often gets into strange places, and does strange things when he gets there. For the length of the muddy salt-water creeks of our coast he digs holes and makes narrow but comfortable houses, where he lies and gazes out all day long upon the interesting though placid scenery of his watery realm, waiting, possibly, for a careless minnow to come within reach of his claws, but with apparently as little on his mind as a fashionable New York loafer, hanging around the doors of a city hotel, or staring vacantly, with feet higher than head, from its sitting-room window, on the passing Broadway pedestrians.

Then again, in the bays where the mud of the creek is replaced by sand, he digs similar holes on the shallow flats, and, backing down into them, passes the days peering into the sky and waiting till the comet shall fall into the sun and raise the temperature of the water to boiling heat, so that he can be ready cooked for the salamander who is to take the place of man when that interesting event shall have occurred. At least this is all that we know that he does, except when we walk about barefooted in his neighbourhood, when we discover that, in taking to housekeeping, he has not surrendered his predatory propensities.

But it may be that he retires indoors, like a modest animal, to change his shirt—anything may be, or may not be, in reference to his motives and conduct—but, if he does, the difficulties of the operation must be greatly increased by the closeness of his quarters. There is scarcely room for himself, and certainly not for himself and his shell, when he has cast off the latter, and his struggles

to get out of his covering, which at the best are severe and exhausting, would be rendered twice as hard in so limited a space. Still, he has an odd way of getting into odd places for odd purposes. What could have induced the subjects of Pharaoh when, three thousand five hundred years ago, they were erecting a monument to the glories of their ruler's reign, to place under that monument four crabs? They were doubtless an intelligent and civilized people; but what connection could the highest intelligence and most perfect civilization discover between a crab and an obelisk? There are few points of similarity between these objects, and the most casual observer will note many differences. An obelisk does not seem, by any natural process, to suggest a crab, nor a crab an obelisk. Our American predecessors, the wild Indians of our coast, must have captured, killed, and eaten crabs for a time during which "the memory of man runneth not to the contrary," and yet there is no evidence that they were in the habit of erecting obelisks. Possibly the engineers of the ancient Egyptians were a jocosely or sarcastic race, and thus covertly conveyed to future times an allegorical intimation of the cruel and crabbed character of the Pharaonic government. Or the great kings themselves may have said, in their plenitude of pride, that, as the world is carried on the back of a tortoise—as all the world knows—their kingdom should be borne on the back of that far nobler and higher animal, the crab.

But these speculations are carrying us away from the main purpose of this paper, and leading us almost to forget the question that was to be answered.

For our better enlightenment we have taken a casual and cursory look into the moral and physical conformation of the creature. We have carried the reader "where crabs grow," but it is necessary to draw a line somewhere, and we cannot enter the vast field of the idealistic, symbolical and imaginative. What we want is a simple answer to a plain inquiry, and we can scarcely be expected to look back three thousand years and search through all the realms of fancy to discover it.

We desire to keep the reader to the point, and not allow him or her to stray off into byways and roundabout lanes, enticing and attractive as they may appear. The question is, Why does the crab go sideways? And, if the reader is prepared to "give it up" by this time, we will furnish the only and correct reply, that is, the only reply which the present state of crab science accepts as correct—for, as to the future, science reserves to itself the right to change its views as freely as it has changed *them* about every other problem on every other conceivable question concerning the "heavens and the earth and the waters under the earth," and every living, moving, breathing or inanimate thing therein or thereabout. But at present science and experience unite in saying that a crab goes sideways for the reason, and no other—and a good reason it seems to be—that a crab cannot go in any other way. For judging by what we know of a crab's disposition, if there was any other way in which it could go, it would go that way. That's all. And if any one has a better reason, let him present it, or "forever after hold his peace."

