

DAVID WORTH DENNIS—AN APPRECIATION.

ALDEN H. HADLEY.

Read at the Annual Meeting of the Indiana Audubon Society, May 10 and 11, 1917. Printed by the request of the Academy of Science.

When the message came telling me that Dr. Dennis had passed away there came over me an unspeakable feeling of sadness, a sense of personal loss that nothing in this world would assuage or repair. Only two or three weeks before those of us who had attended our State Audubon Society meeting at Rushville had been privileged to hear him in one of his characteristic bird talks, which he gave with all his old-time ardor and enthusiasm, before a splendid gathering in the high school building. In the afternoon I had said goodbye, little dreaming that I should see him no more on earth. I had known for a good while that his life was hanging by a slender thread; how slender none of us knew nor dared even guess. Yet during all these days he had gone on cheerfully and undauntedly, giving and taking the best there was in life. And is it not beautifully fitting my friends, that the final summons, which was the beginning of the end, should have come while he was out under the open sky, in God's great Out of Doors, watching the migrant birds, which he loved so well to do.

I said a moment ago that my first feeling, on learning of the death of the man we all loved so well, was one of great sadness and loss, but as the hours passed by there gradually came over me a feeling of a different sort; an almost overwhelming sense of the unspeakable greatness of human life at its best; for as I went back in my mind over the life of David Worth Dennis, so much of it as I myself had known for almost a quarter of a century, a great feeling of exultation came over me and I felt like shouting a loud trumpet note of victory, for *his* was pre-eminently the triumphant life.

In attempting to write just a few words in appreciation of Dr. Dennis, no one can realize more than I the difficulty of the task. It is hard to speak worthily and yet with restraint of such a man. His days and his years were so rich and so full and he touched life at so many points. I have tried hard to picture to myself in some sort of way the influence of that life as a whole and the more I have tried the more has my mind been baffled in the attempt. Pascal has defined the universe as a sphere whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere, and it has occurred to me that in the truest and deepest sense, and without exaggeration, some such definition as this is applicable to the life of Dr. Dennis, in fact to the life of any great loving, throbbing personality that in its journey through the world attempts to "mold things just a little nearer to the heart's desire."

The thought has often come to me that there are few relationships in life that offer richer opportunities for reward and that open up such far-

reaching vistas into the future as that which exists between teacher and student. So I say that when I think of the half century that Dr. Dennis devoted to teaching and of the hundred and thousands of men and women, now scattered over the length and breadth of our land, who have come under the inspiring influence of his great personality, my mind fails utterly to grasp the infinite possibilities for good that flow from such a life.

May I crave your pardon for just a bit of personal reminiscence? As a boy there early dawned in my mind an ardent love for the many things in the great world of Nature about me, and there grew apace the intense and eager desire to learn to know something about all these various forms and the laws of their being. Just about this time some one informed me that there was a man in a college over in Eastern Indiana who could no doubt tell me all the things I most wished to know. At last the time came for me to go. I little dreamed of the things that were in store for me there. Under the patient guiding hand of this teacher we learned to see and to know many things that had hitherto been a sealed book to us. Through the wonderful eye of the microscope we saw something of the mysterious processes of life unfolding itself, and we were constantly taught to look back through the dim vistas of the past in order to try to understand, as best we could, something of what the history of that life had been on the earth. Not only were the beauties and the wonders of many of the forms in Nature's organic kingdom revealed to us, but in the chemical laboratory as well, under his guiding hand, we saw again something of the marvels of the so called inorganic world. There, for the first time, was made known to us something of the strange powers of chemical affinity, the wonderful attractions and repulsions of matter. And here, too, we were led to see that all was law and that nothing in nature comes about by chance. And, moreover, we learned to see that even in Nature's inorganic kingdom there are marvels past finding out, and above all we came to regard this clayey bulk of earth upon which we dwell, not as so much senseless dirt, inert and lifeless, but rightly understood, teeming with boundless life and full of unlimited potentialities. Indeed the deepest lesson that sank into our lives as we came from the class-room of Professor Dennis was that God is not an absentee God but an ever-present God working in his world, and that in the truest imaginable sense each day is a day of creation. With ardor and enthusiasm and a deep and abiding reverence were we taught these things, and not wholly by the spoken word of lecture but as often by the beautiful law of indirection.

Now the work of the scientist is essentially analytic. It is to dissect and to tear part; yet all too frequently is it the case that science teachers leave their world all disarticulate and torn to bits which is calculated to have a rather chilling and depressing effect upon the student. Dr. Dennis was above all a scientist. The scientific habit of mind was his constant characteristic. He was past master in the art of scientific analysis; yet he never left us chilled and depressed or stranded and helpless, for the world that he

had torn to bits under his skilled touch became again orb'd into one beautiful harmonious whole. Herein, no doubt, lay much of his power as a great science teacher. Not that he ever strained a point to make his presentation of the subject in hand popular or entertaining, not that at all. For pseudo-science he had the utmost contempt, and for the so-called nature-faking, and for many of the popular contemporary nature-study books, which he considered full of misrepresentations and inaccuracies, he had also the liveliest criticism. Dr. Jordan had given us a fine picture of Agassiz at Penikese; of the intimate and beautiful relationship that came to exist between the great teacher and the little group of devoted seekers after truth that there gathered about him. I have thought that it is wholly within the bounds of truth to say that something of this same fine spirit and this same enthusiasm that existed at Penikese, came to be the permanent atmosphere that enveloped the class-room in the little Eastern Indiana College where for so many years Dr. Dennis carried on his life work. At any rate I can conceive of no finer relationships than those which there existed between our great teacher and the young men and women who from year to year came into his class-room. It was indeed a memorable event in my own life when some kind fate decreed that I should find my way into his laboratories. On that day, now almost a quarter of a century gone by, I humbly sat at his feet and learned some of the profoundest lessons that have ever come into my life. And in all the years that have since come and gone, years that ripened into a friendship that was too deep and fine for words, I have always felt that he was my teacher and I have never ceased to sit at his feet and learn. I can do no less than bring to you this feeble tribute to his memory today.

Thus far I have spoken primarily of David Worth Dennis as teacher and in this connection I might say that a few years ago one of Indiana's best known and most efficient college presidents remarked that he regarded Dr. Dennis as the most versatile teacher in our state. And this leads me to say a word in regard to his versatility. I have often thought that he missed greatness as a mere scientist by sheer reason of this versatility. He had not the temper or habit of mind that could for long content itself in one narrow field of endeavor. However he had the highest regard for the scientific specialist, for he realized deeply that it is only in this way that the sum total of human knowledge is increased. However, his own restless spirit was interested in the whole vast kingdom of nature. Now it was micro-photography or bacteriology that claimed his attention. Again it was botany or paleontology. Not alone in the realm of science did he have a wide range of interests, but in the world of literature and art were his sympathies and appreciations very broad and deep. I recall in the old college days, when compulsory attendance at morning chapel service was the rule, how invariably there was full attendance when it was learned that Dr. Dennis was going to speak. I furthermore recall on what a wide range of subjects he spoke to us. Perhaps just fresh from a lecture on comparative osteology or embryology

he would entertain and instruct us with a talk on Dante or Venetian architecture.

I spoke awhile ago of his power of keen scientific analysis as being one of his greatest assets as a successful teacher. I neglected to add that in addition to this power his success was due in great measure to an intimate knowledge of the subject in hand, to his boundless love and enthusiasm, which same sentiments he inspired in his students, also to his unstudied, inimitable manner of presentation. I have often found myself wondering whether or not he ever consciously followed any of the laws of pedagogy, his whole method was so naive and artless. It is utterly impossible to convey to any one who has never been privileged to be in his class-room any adequate portrayal of the man as the great teacher that he was. Combined with the qualities above mentioned he possessed an inimitable sense of humor that was constantly playing just beneath the surface of his warm and genial nature. Not only on his own students did he make a powerful and lasting impression but also on the members of the teaching profession at large. One of Indiana's best known teachers has said that Dr. Dennis has probably influenced the teachers of our state more than any other man.

As an exponent of educational theory he was very advanced and progressive, but he was always constructive and never unduly iconoclastic. He felt that we had better keep our house awhile, even though it be poor and insufficient until we found ourselves adequately equipped to replace it with a better one.

I would not in any wise be doing justice to the memory of David Worth Dennis if I did not touch briefly, though, however, inadequately, upon another aspect of his life and character. I think it was Professor Caird who once remarked that "the human soul is a wonderful instrument for the world to play upon." In this figure of Professor Caird there is opened up a vast field of thought and suggestion. It is indeed infinitely important just how the spirit of man reacts as it comes in contact with the strange forces that environ it. The author above quoted has also defined a man's religion as his "summed-up attitude toward the universe." Now Dr. Dennis was profoundly interested in the great problems of science and religion which are ultimately the great problems of being and destiny. Not that he ever wasted any time in useless speculation, he had no inclination for that. He came into the world just about the middle of the last century, at the period when the whole thought of the world was being transformed, and almost the entire structure of human knowledge was being torn down and builded anew. For the nineteenth century will go down in history as the age of the triumph of the evolutionary concept. His young mind early caught the vision which had come to the great Darwin.

"A fire-mist and a planet
 A crystal and a cell
 A jelly-fish and a saurian
 And a cave where the cavemen dwell,
 Then a sense of law and beauty
 And a face turned from the clod,
 Some call it Evolution
 And others call it God."

Fearlessly, yet reverently, he championed the cause of the new knowledge, for he felt deeply, as did the late Professor Drummond, that the idea of evolution had come into the world just in time to save it from despair. It mattered not to him that some of the teachings of this new knowledge seemed to run counter to certain old and time-honored notions held elsewhere. He felt in his inmost being that all truth is one and comes from God, and then and always he followed fearlessly and without misgiving wherever truth seemed to lead.

Now some of the finest spirits of our time have been chilled and depressed by the great discoveries of modern science, for it has seemed to them to accentuate that sense of disproportion between man and the mere vastness of the material universe. To them man has seemed to have been left orphaned and alone in a world without purpose or design. Professor Dennis accepted the conclusions of modern science without reservation, yet with a deep and abiding faith that there is a kind heart beating through the scheme of things. He could exclaim with Tennyson "All's love, yet all's law." And again with Carlyle "the universe is not dead and demoniacal, a charnel house full of spectres, but God-like and my father's."

Those of us who came upon the scene at a somewhat later time have little conception of how hotly the battle raged in those days, now long gone by, nor can we adequately conceive of what courage it required to champion the cause of evolution, especially in those ultra-conservative communities that held steadfastly to the old traditional thought.

I said a moment ago that Dr. Dennis was not a specialist in any particular branch of science but that he was interested in the entire kingdom of nature. He "saw life steadily and saw it whole." So in his early years he caught a vision of another kingdom, the one which the simple Galilean peasant came to establish in the lives and hearts of men. Those of us who knew him best can testify that few men have embodied more fully in their lives the spirit of the gentle Nazarene. It has never been my privilege to know any one who in his thinking had so completely gotten rid of that old and often times arbitrary distinction between things sacred and things secular. To him the whole of life and its activities was bathed with a sacred and transfiguring significance.

I must say just a word about his spirit of magnanimity, his generosity,

for his whole life was one of service. It was characteristic of the man that he never lost interest in his students, even though they were long gone out from his classes, and there are large numbers of men and women throughout the length and breadth of our land now filling positions of trust and importance, who owe such situations to his kindly interest and spirit of helpfulness. This same spirit found expression in many other channels. He was intensely interested in the efforts of science to alleviate human suffering and in its heroic fight against disease. Consequently in his lectures we heard much about Louis Pasteur and others of that group of men who have done so much to lessen the sum total of human misery. Just prior to his death he was actively engaged in an anti-tuberculosis movement in his own community, and he was not only championing this cause by spoken word but by financial support.

I have said little or nothing in regard to the formal or official relationships he bore to various organizations and institutions. This no doubt has been done or will be done elsewhere, for it has been my sole purpose to endeavor to give you a personal appreciation of the man as I knew him. I know he took great interest and delight in the welfare and work of our Indiana Audubon Society of which he had been an officer ever since its organization in 1898. He was president of the society in 1912-13. And now my friends I bring you just one other glimpse of the man whom we are remembering today.

One April day, not long ago, there came to my notice a common enough little incident or rather a simple little drama that went straight to the heart of nature and of life. In an upland field a man was plowing, and following him were a lad of four and a maid of seven. It was one of those glorious spring days when all nature seemed to be springing into newness of life. A soft haze lay on the horizon. From out the near-by woods came the intermittent calls and rapping of wood-peckers and the songs of blue-bird and robins. And up from some neighboring ponds and swales came the musical piping of the hylas. A brown thrush was singing in a haw-thicket. To the boy and the girl just released for this spring-time holiday all nature seemed to be flinging out her eternal challenge and invitation. All the wistful wonder of the world seemed mirrored in their eager ecstatic faces. Now it was a wild-flower with which they came swiftly running to their father, now a great swelling, showy, opening bud of the horse-chestnut, now a curious pebble or a quill dropped from a flicker's wing. All these simple elemental things brought them a joy and a delight that knew no bounds. Now here I thought is the secret of perennial youth to keep untarnished this child-like wonder and delight in these common elemental things of earth. I speak without exaggeration when I say that more than any one I have ever known David Worth Dennis has kept alive, all through the years, this keen and simple and almost childlike love and wonder for the common every day things of God's great Out of Doors. A bird-song, a wild-flower, a rare fern

found in some deep shady glen, a common algae of the brook; all these things moved him to strange delight. Often has he told me that the robin or the blue-bird or the oriole that came and sang in his dooryard this spring had just as fresh an interest, stirred in him just as deep a joy as those which had sung in his boyhood days. In the woods he was a rare companion, and as I pen these lines there come thronging back a host of happy memories of many golden days spent in the woods of May and June. His visits were always looked forward to with eager anticipation and are among the most cherished memories of our lives. I think he knew that the latch-string always hung out at "Pinehurst Farm;" and his simple tastes, his utter freedom from conventionality, his fine sociability and his entertaining talk made him a thrice welcome guest. It mattered not that his coming was unexpectedly announced by a long distance call or a hasty line—neither did it matter that the corn-planter must stand idle for a day or two, for some wonderful things were happening in the woods of the hill-country which very urgently demanded our presence there.

When Robert Louis Stevenson died in Samoa, Bliss Carman, in an impassioned threnody, said of him:

"He was not born for age, Ah no,
For everlasting youth is his!
Part of the lyric of the Earth
With spring and leaf and blade he is."

David Dennis was "part of the lyric of the Earth." He had the spirit of undying youth. Life for him never lost its zest.

It was on a singularly beautiful morning in May when we met in the chapel of the college, where so many of the best years of his life had been spent, to pay a little tribute of love and respect to his memory. Out on the campus the vireos and orioles were singing. The president arose and after reading to us that great Pauline oration in the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians said: "On this the most beautiful day of the year I have read to you one of the most beautiful pieces of literature ever written, and we have come to pay a simple tribute of love to the memory of one of the most beautiful lives that has ever been lived." What more could one say than that? Only, again, just let us say of him those words which Emerson spoke of Thoreau—"Wherever there is truth, wherever there is beauty, wherever there is virtue, he will find a home."