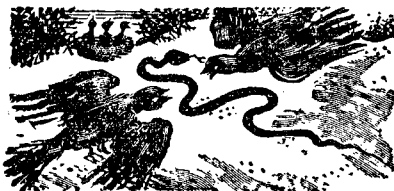

DOWN TO EARTH

by ALAN DEVOE



FACTS ABOUT HYDROPHOBIA

ONE of the pleasures of writing this department is the opportunity it gives to talk about exactly the kinds of things that all of us are agreed are pleasant. We all take summery delight in the cool of the woods. We all enjoy the songs of birds. Each of us is capable of enchantment by the sky, by the snow, by the smell of fresh earth. There is an everlasting part of all of us that goes back and back to the morning of the world, and to a pleasant Garden. It is a happy business to talk about it together.

Every now and then, however, there arises an obligation, as I feel, to speak here of some down-to-earth subject that is popularly avoided as "nasty." After all, earth-life is not all bird-songs and ferny glens and wild-flowers. There are also hurricanes and forest fires, and the deer starving in the snow. There are lice and ticks, immensely populous. The creatures of earth are not exempt from blood-letting and sickness and death. It is

impossible to get "down to earth," or hatch forth any philosophy sturdier than a frivolous sentimentality, without getting down occasionally to precisely such matters as these. Hence I have written on occasion about the bloody rapacity of weasels, and about what happens when a rattlesnake injects its viscous venom, and once a few years ago I wrote a natural history of the internal worms that still continue to inhabit probably a majority of mankind. It is less agreeable to discuss this sort of thing, certainly, than to talk about nature's abundant beauties and benevolences; but sometimes it requires to be done.

This month the subject is going to be hydrophobia. It is a grim subject; and it has seemed only fair to warn away those readers who may care to read no further than this point.

It is extraordinary how little appears in print about hydrophobia. The reason, it may be guessed, is our devotion to dogs, and our reluctance to consider the fact that dogs are capable of giving us one of the most horrific diseases of which it is possible

for hapless man to die. Nowadays the public prints have come to be full of frank and informative talk about syphilis and cancer. There has even been a certain publicizing of leprosy, an ailment which exceedingly few of us are likely to have. But hydrophobia, no. Any man anywhere, however, stands a chance of being bitten by a rabid dog. Any naturalist or outdoorsman incurs the possibility of being bitten by a rabid skunk, fox, raccoon, or any of the other numerous wild animals whose bite can transmit the disease. It is not sensible to refuse consideration of a disease which is as old as it is deadly. Indeed refusal of intelligent consideration has resulted in a vast proliferation of myths about hydrophobia. Some of the myths make the disease seem even more dreadful than in fact it is. Some of them result in the annual destruction of a great many "mad" dogs which are not rabid at all. All of them, as is the way with myths, are in one way or another dangerous or corrupting.

It is popularly supposed that when a dog froths and foams at the mouth, it is necessarily an indication of hydrophobia. This is not so.

It is supposed that a rabid dog dreads water, and cannot be induced to drink or even to enter a brook or pond. This is not so.

There is a remarkably widespread belief that a bite by any dog which is in a state of furious anger can give hydrophobia to the bitten. This is the eeriest moonshine; but it persists.

A human being suffering from hydrophobia, according to perhaps the most widespread and horridest folk-fancy of them all, takes on the dog's personality. He snaps and barks. Though the symptoms of hydrophobia are bad enough, there is no such transformation of man into beast. There is no such black mystery of metamorphosis.

And so on and so on, myth piling on misunderstanding. Hydrophobia has been recorded among men since before the days of Aristotle. It is a part of earth-life, as much so as gentians and thrushes. What are the facts about it?

II

Some months ago a reader who had seen an article of mine on skunks, in which I had stressed the calm amiability of those staid little animals, sent me a letter of dissent. Skunks, he said, were evidently not as placid as I had indicated. He enclosed a clipping from his local newspaper. It told how a lady of his village had that day encountered a skunk near her home, and how the skunk had without provocation rushed at her and bitten her on the foot. A neighbor had despatched the skunk with a club.

I am not a zoological diagnostician, but it seemed imperative to risk a long-distance guess. I sent my correspondent a telegram, urging that if the skunk's body had not been destroyed it should be handed at once to the nearest pathologist for examination to test my strong suspicion that it was

suffering from hydrophobia. I record here, with complacency, receipt a few days later of an awed acknowledgment that the skunk had indeed been found rabid.

The guess, however, was not very remarkable. For the first symptom of hydrophobia in animals is not foaming at the mouth or "fits." It is personality change. If a woodsman meets a fox that runs *toward* him, however friskily and unmenacingly, the part of wisdom and prudence is to climb a tree. The first sign of hydrophobia in a sheep is very often a glare of irritability in its normally reposeful glance. Skunks do not normally take the offensive; nor is the weapon a skunk employs normally its teeth. It required no great diagnostic acuity to guess that the skunk in my correspondent's clipping was probably rabid, for the creature had shown strikingly that preeminent hydrophobia-symptom which the classical medical literature describes in the stately phrase "inversion of sentiment."

In dogs, the commonest and probably the original harborers of hydrophobia, the personality-change begins subtly and progresses gradually. A normally spirited dog becomes dull and slinks persistently into hiding, only to emerge again at once and prowl and pace with vacant-eyed restlessness. Or a usually lethargic dog begins to show bursts of unaccountable frolicsomeness and excitement, bounding and jumping for no good

reason, darting quick startled glances at nothing in particular, often licking its owner in what appears a turmoil of unsolicited affection. As the disease advances, the alteration of personality becomes more and more marked, and the signs of rabies (which is of course simply the Latin word for madness) become increasingly evident. There is apt to be furious hunger, and usually deranged hunger: for wood, metal, earth, stones, and for the dog's own voidings. There is no fear of water, but on the contrary a raging thirst. Then, presently, there comes the next phase: constriction of the animal's throat, with often a paralysis of the jaw, so that the dog's mouth hangs open. The dog is in a tumult of restlessness now, prowling, sniffing, picking up odds and ends to carry them purposelessly for a while and then drop them, snapping and slashing at invisible things in the air.

In some cases of hydrophobia, the dog may die without ever showing further symptoms than these. It is important to realize that even in the early and relatively subtle stages, *the dog's saliva is already deadly*. A man inoculated with it, and untreated, will die in a peculiarly hideous agony. Commonly, however, there is a last stage in dogs' hydrophobia. This is the "furious rabies," when the dog barks and yells in a weirdly cracked voice, when it becomes numb to pain and often bites itself savagely, and when at last it starts its final silent and terrible running, snapping and tearing at every creature it meets. It dies

at last paralyzed and convulsed, tormented by thirst but unable to swallow. In this last stage there is frequently a flecking of foam around the dog's muzzle. But such foaming is by no means always in evidence, nor is foam, in itself, to be taken as evidence of hydrophobia. Canine creatures may foam at the mouth for any of many reasons. The truly distinguishing symptoms of hydrophobia are simply the symptoms of madness, of "inversion of sentiment" and deterioration of personality: from the first subtle signs of strange-eyed feyness to the final total burst of ravening dementia that ends in death.

Such is the nature and progress of hydrophobia in animals. It is unnecessary to harass ourselves with minutely detailed description of the disease in human victims; but the similarity is close. There is the same mounting restlessness, and then an anxiety which rises to generalized fear and then rises to the intensity of terror. There is the constriction of the throat, so that attempts to swallow water produce suffocating paroxysms and hence a *hydro-phobia* . . . a terror of trying to drink at all. There are spasms and convulsions, so affecting the breathing that it becomes a rasping and howling hardly human (whence the folk-myth to the effect that rabies-victims "bark"), and there is an inability to swallow spittle (whence the notion that the victim foams at the mouth dog-wise). There is muscular spasm of the jaws (whence the notion that the victim is trying to

snap and bite). There is finally maniacal excitement and at last the blessing of death, by paralysis or strangling or both.

III

Since the summer of 1885, we have had the mercy of the Pasteur treatment. The ancients had no treatment for the bite of a mad dog but the heroic one of excising the bitten part immediately, before the injected saliva could circulate. A popular and esteemed medical work of the mid-nineteenth century, which lies before me, could suggest nothing better than to force the victim to drink a mixture of "powdered scullcap leaves" and "the strongest Aqua Ammonia," following this up with an unbelievable brew made by boiling five ounces of red chickweed in two quarts of ale, to which, when evaporated to one quart, were to be added two fluid drachms of laudanum. It may be hoped that perhaps at least this was capable of easing the sufferer into stupor.

Today, thanks to the brilliant work of Pasteur (and also to the work of Lepp, Babes, Tizzoni, Centanni and several other experimenters insufficiently remembered), we have superior means of combating hydrophobia. Still, not every dog-bite victim can have the animal that has bitten him examined. Not every dog-bite victim can be made to take the trouble to do anything about the bite. Not everyone has learned, as we all ought, to recognize the signs — es-

pecially the early signs — of hydrophobia in animals. And not every dog-bite victim is old enough to realize, even, that he has suffered a bite. There are children. There is still hydrophobia.

That is why, now and again, there have to be muzzling ordinances issued. There have to be leashing ordinances. There have to be dog quarantines. The measures commonly meet with an uproar of protest from sentimental dog-lovers.

Such uproar is possible only from people who cannot know the facts of

what hydrophobia is like. There is scarcely a more grotesquely ghastly disease under the sun. That the facts may be better known, and some myths discounted, is the reason why "Down to Earth" has been written on this theme this month. It would have been pleasanter to write (and read) about a wildflower or a bird-song or the look of the friendly farmlands now in November. But the life of earth has likewise its "nasty" aspects and its rigorous ones and its mortal dangers; and it can hardly be wise to think not.

PHRASE ORIGINS—40

RUN THE GAUNTLET, THROW DOWN THE GAUNTLET: *The gauntlets of these commonly used phrases are of different origins. In the first phrase, gauntlet is a corruption of a Swedish word meaning a running through a lane or passage. Written gantlope at first, it was soon confused with gauntlet, which, as it was used in the second phrase, meant "glove." "Running the gauntlet" was a form of military and naval punishment said to have been invented during the Thirty Years' War. The culprit had to run through two rows of men who struck at him with knotted ropes or sticks. The modern use of the phrase is of course figurative; it is generally used in reference to someone who is exposed to a great deal of hostile criticism. "Throwing down the gauntlet" means issuing a challenge. The phrase originated in a medieval custom. A knight threw down a glove, and whoever picked it up accepted the challenge. This ceremony was used at the coronation of English monarchs. The King's Champion rode through Westminster Hall and threw down the iron glove, or gauntlet. There is no record of anyone ever picking it up to challenge the authority of the newly-crowned king.*

MORRIS ROSENBLUM