The day I remember best was in the first spring I owned the place. I took Salud, the large poodle, and four of his puppies on an early morning walk to the lake. As we reached the heavily wooded small hill opposite the lake, Salud stopped, wheeled sharply, ran into the woods, and then slowly backed down to the road. The puppies and I went past him to the lake and I whistled for him, sure that he had been attracted by a wood-chuck. But when I looked back he was immobile on the road, as if he had taken a deep breath and had not let it out. I called to him but he did not move. I called again in a command tone that he had never before disobeyed. He made an obedient movement of his head and front legs, stared at me, and turned back. I had never seen a dog stand paralyzed and, as I went back toward him, I remembered old tales of snakes and the spell they cast. I stopped to pick up a heavy stick and a rock, frightened of seeing the snake. As I heard Salud make a strange bark, I threw the rock over his head and into the woods, yelling at him to follow me. As the rock hit the ground, there was a heavy movement straight in front of the dog. Sure now that it was a snake about to strike, I ran toward Salud, grabbed his collar, and stumbled with the weight of him. He pulled away from me and moved slowly toward the sound. As I picked myself up, I saw a large,
possibly three-foot round shell move past him and go slowly toward the water. It was a large turtle.

Salud moved with caution behind the turtle and as I stood, amazed at the picture of the dog and the slowly moving shell, the dog jumped in front of the turtle, threw out a paw, and the jaws of the turtle clamped down on the leg. Salud was silent, then he reared back and a howl of pain came from him that was like nothing I had ever heard before. I don't know how long it took me to act, but I came down hard with my stick on the turtle's tail, and he was gone into the water. Salv's leg was a mess but he was too big for me to carry, so I ran back to the house for Fred and together we carried him to a vet. A week later, he was well enough to limp for the rest of his life.

Hammett was in California for a few weeks and so I went alone almost every day to the lake in an attempt to see the turtle again, remembering that when I was a child in New Orleans I had gone each Saturday with my aunt to the French market to buy supplies for her boardinghouse. There had been two butchers in the market who had no thumbs, the thumbs having been taken off as they handled snapping turtles.

Hammett came back to the farm upset and angry to find his favorite dog was crippled. He said he had always known there were snatchers in the lake, and snakes as well, but now he thought we ought to do something, and so he began his usual thorough research. The next few weeks brought books and government publications on how to trap turtles and strange packages began to arrive: large wire mesh cages, meant for something else but stared at for days until Hammett decided how to alter them; giant fishhooks; extra heavy, finely made rope; and a book on tying knots. We both read about the origin of snapping turtles, but it didn't seem to me the accounts said very much: a guess that they were the oldest living species that had remained unchanged, that their jaws were powerful and of great danger to an enemy, that they could do nothing if turned on their backs, and the explanation of why my turtle had come out of the woods—each spring the female laid eggs on land, sat on them each day, and took the chance that the hatched babies would find their way to water.

One day, a month later perhaps—there was never any hurrying Hammett when he had made up his mind to learn about something—we went to the lake carrying the wire cages, the giant fishhooks, fish heads and smelly pieces of meat that he had put in the sun a few days before. I grew bored, as I often did, with the slow precision which was part of Dash's doing anything, and walked along the banks of the lake as he tied the bait inside the traps, baited the hooks, and rowed out with them to find heavy overhanging branches to attach them to.

2. Dashiell Hammett, author of *The Thin Man* and other masterpieces of the hardboiled detective story.

He had finished with one side of the lake, and had rowed himself beyond my view to the south side, when I decided on a swim. As I swam slowly toward the raft, I saw that one limb of a sassafras tree was swinging wildly over the water, some distance from me. Sitting on the raft, I watched it until I saw that the movement was caused by the guyline that held one of the hooks Hammet had tied to the branch. I shouted at Hammet that he had caught a turtle and he called back that couldn't be true so fast, and I called back that he was to come for me quick because I was frightened and not to argue.

As he came around the bend of the lake, he grinned at me.

"Drunk this early?"

I pointed to the swinging branch. He forgot about me and rowed over very fast. I saw him haul at the line, having trouble lifting it, stand up in the boat, haul again, and then slowly drop the line. He rowed back to the raft.

"It's a turtle all right. Get in. I need help."

I took the oars as he stood up to take the line from the tree. The line was so heavy that as he moved to attach it to the stern of the rowboat he toppled backward. I put an oar into the center of his back.

He stared at me, rubbing his back. "Remind me," he said and tied the line to the stern. Then he took the oars from me.

"Remind you of what?"

"Never to save me. I've been meaning to tell you for a long time."

When we reached the boat, we detached the rope and began to pull the rope on land. A turtle, larger than the one I had seen with Salud, was hauled up and I jumped back as the head came shooting out. Dash leaned down, grabbed the tail, and threw the turtle on its back.

"The hook is in fine. It'll hold. Go back and get the car for me."

I said, "I don't like to leave you alone, you shouldn't be handling that thing—"

"Go on," he said. "A turtle isn't a woman. I'll be safe."

We took the turtle home tied to the back bumper, dragging it through the dirt of the mile to the house. Dash went to the toolhouse for an axe, came back with it and a long heavy stick. He turned the turtle on its stomach, handed me the stick, and said, "Stand far back, hold the stick out, and wait until he snaps at it."

I did that, the turtle did snap, and the axe came down. But Dash missed because the turtle, seeing his arm, quickly withdrew his head. We tried five or six times. It was a hot day and that's why I thought I was sweating and, anyway, I never was comfortable with Hammett when he was doing something that didn't work.

He said, "Try once more."

I put the stick out, the turtle didn't take it, then did, and as he did, I moved my hand down the stick thinking that I could hold it better. The
tortoise dropped the stick and made the fastest move I have ever seen for
my hand. I jumped back and the stick bruised my leg. Hammett put down
the axe, took the stick from me, shook his head and said, "Go lie down."

I said I wasn't going to and he said I was to go somewhere and get out of
his way. I said I wasn't going to do that either, that he was in a bad temper
with me only because he couldn't kill the turtle with the axe.

"I am going to shoot it. But that's not my reason for bad temper. We've
got some talking to do, you and I, it's been a long time."

"Talk now."

"No. I'm busy. I want you out of the way."

He took my arm, moved me to the kitchen steps, pushed me down and
went into the house for a rifle. When he came out he put a piece of meat
in front of the turtle's head and got behind it. We waited for a long time.
Finally, the head did come out to stare at the meat and Hammett's gun
went off. The shot was a beauty, just slightly behind the eyes. As I ran
toward them the turtle's head convulsed in a forward movement, the feet
carried the shell forward in a kind of heavy leap. I leaned down close and
Hammett said, "Don't go too near. He isn't dead."

Then he picked up the axe and came down very hard on the neck,
severing the head to the skin.

"That's odd," he said. "The shot didn't kill it, and yet it went through
the brain. Very odd."

He grabbed the tortoise by the tail and carried it up the long flight of
steps to the kitchen. We found some newspapers and put the turtle on
top of the coal stove that wasn't used much anymore except in the
sausage-making season.

I said, "Now we'll have to learn about cutting it for soup."

Dash nodded. "O.K. But it's a long job. Let's wait until tomorrow."

I left a note under Helen's door—it was her day off and she had gone to
New York—warning her there was a turtle sitting on the stove and not to
be frightened. Then I telephoned my Aunt Jenny in New Orleans to get
the recipe for the good soup of my childhood and she said I was to stay
away from live turtles and go back to fine embroidery like a nice lady.

The next morning, coming down at six to help Fred milk the cows, I
forgot about the turtle until I started down the kitchen steps and saw
blood. Then, thinking it was the blood that we had spilled carrying the
turtle into the house the evening before, I went on toward the barns.
When I came back at eight, Helen asked me what I wanted for breakfast,
what had I made cornbread, and what had I meant by a turtle on the stove?

Going up to have a bath, I called back, "Just what I said. It's a turtle on
the stove and you must know about snappers from your childhood."

After a few minutes she came upstairs to stare at me in the bathtub.
"There ain't no turtle. But there's a mess of blood."

"On top of the coal stove," I said. "Just go have a look."

"I had a lot of looks. There ain't no turtle on top a stove in this house."
"Go wake Mr. Hammett," I said, "right away."
"I wouldn't like to do that," she said. "I don't like to wake men."
I went running down to the kitchen, and then fast back upstairs to
Hammett's room, and shook him hard.

"Get up right away. The turtle's gone."
He turned over to stare at me. "You drink too much in the morning."
I said, "The turtle's gone."
He came down to the kitchen in a few minutes, stared at the stove, and
turned to Helen. "Did you clean the floor?"
"Yes," she said, "it was all nasty. Look at the steps."
He stared at the steps that led to the cellar and out to the lawn. Then
he moved slowly down the steps, following the path of blood spots, and
out into the orchard. Near the orchard, planted many years before I
owned the house, was a large rock garden, over half an acre of rare trees
and plants, rising steep above the house entrance. Hammett turned


toward it, following a path around the orchard. He said, "Once, when I
worked for Pinkerton, I found a stolen ferris wheel for a traveling

country fair. Then I lost the ferris wheel and, as far as I know, nobody
ever found it again."

I said, "A turtle is not a ferris wheel. Somebody took the turtle."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Got a theory?"

"The turtle moved himself."

"I don't like what you're saying. He was dead last night. Stone dead."

"Look," he said.
He was pointing into the rock garden. Salud and three poodle puppies
were sitting on a large rock, staring at something in a bush. We ran
toward the garden. Hammett told the puppies to go away and parted the
branches of the bush. The turtle, sliding in an effort at movement, was
trying to leave the bush, its head dangling from one piece of neck skin.
"My God," we both said at the same time and stood watching the
turtle for the very long time it took to move a foot away from us. Then it
stopped and its back legs stiffened. Salud, quiet until now, immediately
leaped on it and his two puppies, yapping, leaped after him. Salud licked
the blood from the head and the turtle moved his front legs. I grabbed
Salud's collar and threw him too hard against a rock.

Hammett said, "The turtle can't bite him now: He's dead."
I said, "How do you know?" He picked up the turtle by the tail. "What
are you going to do?"

"Take it back to the kitchen."
I said, "Let's take it to the lake. It's earned its life."

"It's dead. It's been dead since yesterday."

3. An agency that provided guards and private detectives.
"No. Or maybe it was dead and now it isn't."

"The resurrection? You're a hard woman for an ex-Catholic," he said, moving off.

I was behind him as he came into the kitchen, threw the turtle on a marble slab. I heard Helen say, "My goodness, the good Lord help us all."

Hammett took one of the butcher knives. He moved his lips as if rehearsing what he had read. Then he separated the leg meat from the shell, cutting expertly around the joints. The other leg moved as the knife went in.

Helen went out of the kitchen and I said, "You know very well that I help with the butchering of the animals here and don't like talk about how distasteful killing is by people who are willing to eat what is killed for them. But this is different. This is something else. We shouldn't touch it. It has earned its life."

He put down the knife. "O.K. Whatever you want."

We both went into the living room and he picked up a book. After an hour I said, "Then how does one define life?"

He said, "Lilly, I'm too old for that stuff."

Toward afternoon, I telephoned the New York Zoological Society of which I was a member. I had a hard time being transferred to somebody who knew about turtles. When I finished, the young voice said, "Yes, the Chelydra serpentina. A ferocious foe. Where did you meet it?"

"Meet it?"

"Encounter it."

"At a literary cocktail party by a lake."

He coughed. "On land or water? Particularly ferocious when encountered on land. Bites with such speed that the naked human eye often cannot follow the movement. The limbs are powerful and a narrow projection from each side connects them to the carapace."

"Yes," I said. "You are reading from the same book I read. I want to know how it managed to get down a staircase and up into a garden with its head hanging only by a piece of skin."

"An average snapper weighs between twenty and thirty pounds, but many have weighed twice that amount. The eggs are very interesting, hard of shell, often compared with ping-pong balls."

"Please tell me what you think of, of, of its life."

After a while he said, "I don't understand."

"Is it, was it, alive when we found it in the garden? Is it alive now?"

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"I'm asking about life. What is life?"

"I guess what comes before death. Please put its heart in a small amount of salted water and be kind enough to send us a note reporting how long the heart beats. Our records show ten hours."

"Then it isn't dead."

"There was a pause. "In our sense."

"What is our sense?"

There was talk in the background noise and I heard him whisper to somebody. Then he said, "The snapping turtle is a very low, possibly the lowest, form of life."

I said, "Is it alive or is it dead? That's all I want to know, please."

There was more whispering. "You asked me for a scientific opinion, Miss Hellerman. I am not qualified to give you a theological one. Thank you for calling."

Ten or twelve years later, at the end of a dinner party, a large lady crossed the room to sit beside me. She said she was engaged in doing a book on Madame de Staël, and when I had finished with the sounds I have for what I don't know about she said, "My brother used to be a zoologist. You once called him about a snapping turtle." I said to give him my regards and apologies and she said, "Oh, that's not necessary. He practices in Calcutta."

But the day of the phone call I went to tell Hammett about my conversation. He listened, smiled when I came to the theological part, went back to reading an old book called The Animal Kingdom. My notation in the front of this book, picked up again on a July afternoon in 1972, is what brought me to this memory of the turtle.

Toward dinnertime, Helen came into the room and said, "That turtle. I can't cook with it sitting around me."

I said to Hammett, "What will we do?"

"Make soup."

"The next time. The next turtle. Let's bury this one."

"You bury it."

"You're punishing me," I said, "Why?"

"I'm trying to understand you."

"It's that it moved so far. It's that I've never before thought about life, if you know what I mean."

"No, I don't," he said.

"Well, what is life and stuff like that."

"Stuff like that. At your age."

I said, "You are much older than I am."

"That still makes you thirty-four and too old for stuff like that."

"You're making fun of me."

"Cut it out, Lilly. I know all the signs."

"Signs of what?"

He got up and left the room. I carried up a martini an hour later and said, "Just this turtle, the next I'll be O.K."

"Fine with me," he said, "either way."

"No, it isn't fine with you. You're saying something else."

"I'm saying cut it out."
“And I’m saying—”
“I don’t want any dinner,” he said.
I left the room and slammed the door. At dinner time I sent Helen up to
tell him to come down immediately and she came back and said he wasn’t hungry immediately.
During dinner she said she didn’t want the turtle around when she
came down for breakfast.
About ten, when Helen had gone to bed, I went upstairs and threw a
book against Hammett’s door.
“Yes?” he said.
“Please come and help me bury the turtle.”
“I don’t bury turtles.”
“Will you bury me?”
“When the time comes, I’ll do my best,” he said.
“Open the door.”
“No. Get Fred Herrmann to help you bury the turtle. And borrow
Helen’s prayer book.”
But by the time I had had three more drinks, it was too late to wake
Fred. I went to look at the turtle and saw that its blood was dripping to the
floor. For many years, and for many years to come, I had been
frightened of Helen and so, toward midnight, I tied a rope around the
turtle’s tail, took a flashlight, dragged it down the kitchen steps to the
garage, and tied the rope to the bumper of the car. Then I went back to
stand under Hammett’s window.
I shouted up: “I’m weak. I can’t dig a hole big enough. Come help me.”
After I had said it twice, he called down, “I wish I could help you, but
I’m asleep.”
I spent the next hour digging a hole on the high ground above the lake,
and by the time I covered the turtle the whiskey in the bottle was gone
and I was dizzy and feeling sick. I put a stick over the grave, drove the car
back toward the house, and when I was halfway there evidently fell
asleep because I woke up at dawn in a heavy rain with the right wheels of the
car turned into a tree stump. I walked home to bed and neither
Hammett nor I mentioned the turtle for four or five days. That was no
accident because we didn’t speak to each other for three of those days,
eating our meals at separate times.
Then he came back from a late afternoon walk and said, “I’ve caught
two turtles. What would you like to do with them?”
“Kill them. Make soup.”
“You’re sure?”
“The first of anything is hard,” I said. “You know that.”
“I didn’t know that until I met you,” he said.
“I hurt my back digging the grave and I’ve a cold, but I had to bury that
turtle and I don’t want to talk about it again.”

“You didn’t do it very well. Some animal’s been at your grave and
eaten the turtle, but God will bless you anyway. I gathered the bones, put
them back in the hole, and painted a tombstone sign for you.”

For all the years we lived on the place, and maybe even now, there was
a small wooden sign, neatly painted: “My first turtle is buried here. Miss
Religious L.H.”

James Stevenson

OFF OFF BROADWAY JOURNAL

Gypsy moths keep landing on face. Around 10 p.m., drift off into half
sleep. Wakened by wrong number at ten-twenty. Toss; turn; toss; turn.
Can’t get back to sleep. Decide to read. Moths flutter around light. Pick
up bedside copy of Jane Eyre. Jane, a few months after her arrival at
Thornfield, is having rough night:

... I started wide awake on hearing a vague murmur, peculiar and lugubri-
ous, which sounded, I thought, just above me. I wished I had kept my candle
burning: the night was drearily dark; my spirits were depressed. I rose and sat
up in bed, listening. The sound was hushed.

I tried again to sleep; but my heart beat anxiously: my inward tranquility
was broken. The clock, far down in the hall, struck two. Just then it seemed
my chamber-door was touched; as if fingers had swept the panels in groping a
way along the dark gallery outside. I said, “Who is there?” Nothing answered.
I was chilled with fear....

[There] was a demoniacal laugh—low, suppressed, and deep—uttered, as it
seemed, at the very key-hole of my chamber door. The head of my bed was
near the door, and I thought at first the goblin-laughter stood at my bedside
—or rather, crouched by my pillow: but I rose, looked round, and could see
nothing; while, as I still gazed, the unnatural sound was reiterated: and I knew
it came from behind the panels. My first impulse was to rise and fasten the
bolt; my next, again to cry out, “Who is there?”

Something gurgled and moaned....

Scene not conducive to sleep for Jane, me, or Mr. Rochester (whose
bed is soon set ablaze by the crazed woman who has escaped from the

1. The term “Off Broadway” was coined to refer to theatrical companies or productions
too experimental for standard Broadway tastes; as Off Broadway productions became,
inevitably, more commercial, their place was taken by “Off Off Broadway”, the theaters,
lofts, or other spaces in which these productions are staged are mainly located
near Greenwich Village or in the Lower East Side area of New York City.
2. Famous novel (1847) by Charlotte Brontë.