



# ANATOMY OF A CRAP

*Bowels are not exactly a polite subject for conversation, but they are certainly a common problem. . . . Please think of me again as the urologist's daughter. . . . It may disgust you that I have brought it up at all, but who knows? Life has some problems which are basic for all of us — and about which we have a natural reticence.*

*Katharine Hepburn, The Making of The African Queen*

In the mid-1800s in the Royal Borough of Chelsea, London, an industrious young English plumber named Thomas Crapper grabbed Progress in his pipe wrench and with a number of sophisticated sanitation inventions leapfrogged ahead one hundred years. T. J. Crapper found himself challenged by problems we wrestle with yet today; water quality and water conservation. Faced with London's diminishing reservoirs drained almost dry by the valve leakage and "continuous flush systems" of early water closets, Crapper developed the *water waste preventer* — the very siphonic cistern with uphill flow and automatic shut-off found in modern toilet tanks. T. Crapper & Co Ld, Sanitary Engineers, Marlboro Works, Chelsea (as his name still appears on three manhole covers in Westminster Abbey) was also responsible for laying hundreds of

T.J. Crapper and his wonderful invention.



miles of London's connecting sewers — and none too soon. The River Thames carried such quantities of rotting turds that the effluvium had driven Parliament to convene in the early morning hours to avoid a vile off-river breeze.

For the Victorian ladies who complained of the WC's hissing and gurgling as giving away their elaborately disguised trips to the loo, Crapper installed the first silencers. Such pretenses as "pricking the plum pudding" or "picking the daisies" were foiled when a lady's absence was accompanied by crashing waterfalls and echoing burbles. Among Mr. Crapper's other claims to fame were his pear-shaped toilet seat (the forerunner of the gap-front seat) designed for men, and the posthumous addition to the English language of a vibrant new word: *Crapper!*

Clearly, T. J. Crapper was ahead of his day. Progress and time, nonetheless, are peculiar concepts. Some things in the universe — pollution, the use of euphemisms, *sneaking* off to the bathroom and tinkling silently down the side of the bowl, to name a few — seem to defy change, even from century to century. But there's been one glaring reversal in regard to crap. Our advanced 1990s populace, well removed from the novelties and quirks of the first indoor WCs, finds itself having to break entirely new ground, as it were, when relieving itself outside. Ironically, shitting in the woods successfully — that is, without adverse environmental, psychological, or physical consequences — might be deemed genuine progress today. Take Henry, for instance (a namesake, perhaps, or even a descendant of old King Henry VIII).

All the stories you are about to read are true (for the most part), having been extracted from dear friends and voluble strangers on various occasions, sometimes following the ingestion of copious quantities of Jose Cuervo or Yukon Jack. Only the names have been changed to protect the incommodious.

High on a dusty escarpment jutting skyward from camp, a man named Henry, having scrambled up there and squeezed in behind what appeared to be the ideal bush for camouflage, began lowering himself precariously into a deep knee bend. Far below,

just out of their bedrolls, three fellow river runners violated the profound quiet of canyon's first light by poking about the commissary, cracking eggs, snapping twigs, and sloshing out the coffee pot. Through the branches, our pretzel man on the hill observed the breakfast preparations while proceeding with his own morning mission. To the earth it finally fell, round and firm, this sturdy turd. With a bit more encouragement from gravity, it rolled slowly out from between Henry's big boots, threaded its way through the spindly trunks of the "ideal" bush, and then truly taking on a mind of its own, leaped into the air like a downhill skier out at the gate.

You can see the dust trail of a fast-moving pickup mushrooming off a dirt road long after you've lost sight of the truck. Henry watched, wide-eyed and helpless, as a similar if smaller cloud billowed up defiantly below him, and the actual item became obscured from view. Zigging and zagging, it caromed off rough spots in the terrain. Madly it bumped and tumbled and dropped, as though making its run through a giant pinball machine. Gaining momentum, gathering its own little avalanche, round and down it spun like a buried back tire spraying up sand. All too fast it raced down the steep slope — until it became locked into that deadly slow motion common to the fleeting seconds just preceding all imminent, unalterable disasters. With one last bounce, one final effort at heavenward orbit, this unruly goof ball (followed by an arcing tail of debris) landed in a terminal thud and a rain of pebbly clatter not six inches from the bare foot of the woman measuring out coffee.

With his dignity thus unraveled along sixty yards of descent, Henry in all likelihood might have come home from his first river trip firmly resolved to never again set foot past the end of the asphalt. Of course, left to his own devices and with any determination at all unless he was a total fumble-bum, Henry would have learned how to shit in the woods. Eventually. The refining of his skills by trial and error and the acquiring of grace, poise, and self-confidence — not to mention muscle development and balance — would probably have taken him about as long as it did me: years.

I don't think Henry would mind our taking a closer look at his calamity. Henry can teach us a lot, and not all by poor example. Indeed, he started out on the right track by getting

far enough away from camp to ensure his privacy. Straight up just wasn't the best choice of direction. Next he chose a location with a view, although whether he took time to appreciate it is unknown. Usually I recommend a wide reaching view, a landscape rolling away to distant mountain peaks and broad expanses of wild sky. But a close-in setting near a lichen-covered rock, a single wildflower, or even dried up weeds and monotonous talus when quietly studied, can offer inspiration of a different brand.

The more time you spend in the wild, the easier it will be to reconnoiter an inspiring view. A friend of mine calls her morning exercise the Advanced Wilderness Appreciation Walk. As she strides along an irrigation canal practically devoid of vegetation, but overgrown with crumpled beer cans, has-been appliances, and rusted auto parts, she finds the morning's joy in the colors of the sunrise and the backlighting of a lone thistle.

Essential for the outdoor neophyte is a breathtaking view. These opportunities for glorious moments alone in the presence of grandeur should be soaked up. They are soul-replenishing and mind-expanding. The ideal occasion for communing with nature is while you're peacefully sitting still — yes, shitting in the woods. The rest of the day, unless you're trekking solo, can quickly become cluttered with social or organizational distractions.

But back to Henry, whose only major mistake was failing to dig a hole. It's something to think about: a small hole preventing the complete destruction of an ego. A proper hole is of great importance, not only in averting disasters such as Henry's, but in preventing the spread of disease and facilitating rapid decomposition. Chapter Two in its entirety is devoted to *the hole*.

More do's and don'ts for preserving mental and physical health while shitting in the woods will become apparent as we look in on Charles. He has his own notion about clothes and pooping in the wilderness: he takes them off. Needless to say, this man hikes well away from camp and any connecting trails to a place where he feels secure about completely removing his britches and relaxing for a spell. Finding an ant-free log, he digs his hole on the opposite side from the view, sits down, scoots to the back of the log, and floats into the rhapsody that pine

tops find in the clouds. Remember this one. This is by far the dreamiest, most relaxing set up for shitting in the woods. A smooth, breadloaf-shaped rock (or even your backpack in a pinch in vacant wasteland) can be used in the same manner — for hanging your buns over the back.

This seems like an appropriate spot to share a helpful technique imparted to me one day by another friend: “Shit first, dig later.” In puzzlement, I turned to her and as our eyes met she watched mine grow into harvest moons. But of course, “shit first, dig later” — that way you could never miss the hole. It was the perfect solution! Perfect, that is, for anyone with bad aim. Me? Not me.

Unlike Charles, there’s my longtime friend Elizabeth who prizes the usefulness of her clothes. While on a rattletrap bus trip through northern Mexico, the lumbering vehicle on which she rode came to a five-minute halt to compensate for the lack of a toilet on board. Like a colorful parachute descending from the desert skies, Lizzie’s voluminous skirts billowed to the earth, and she squatted down inside her own private outhouse.

Occasionally it is impossible to obtain an optimal degree of privacy. Some years back, my colleague Henrietta Alice was hitchhiking on the Autobahn in Germany, where the terrain was board flat and barren. At last, unable to contain herself, she asked the driver to stop and she struck out across a field toward a knoll topped by a lone bush. There, hidden by the branches and feeling safe from the eyes of traffic, she squatted and swung up the back of her skirt, securing it as a cape over her head. But Henrietta’s rejoicing ended abruptly. Out of nowhere came a column of Boy Guides (the rear guard?) marching past her bare *derrière*.

There are many theories on clothes and shitting, all individual and personal. In time you will develop your own. Edwin, our next case study, has a new theory about clothes after one memorable hunting trip; whether it be to take them off or keep them on, I haven’t figured out.

For the better part of a nippy fall morning, Edwin had been slinking through whole mountain ranges of gnarly underbush in pursuit of an elusive six-pointer. Relentlessly trudging along with no luck, he finally became discouraged, a cold drizzle adding to his gloom. Then a lovely meadow opened

before him and its beauty caused him to pause. His attention averted from the deer, he now relaxed into a gaze of pleasure, and soon became aware of his physical discomforts: every weary muscle, every labored joint, every minuscule bramble scratch — and then another pressing matter.

Coming upon a log beneath a spreading tree, Edwin propped up his rifle, quickly slipped off his poncho, and slid the suspenders from his shoulders. Whistling now, he sat and shat. But when he turned to bid it farewell, not a thing was there. Oh, hell! In total disbelief, Edwin peered over the log once more, still finding nothing. The sky opened and it began to rain and a pleasant vision of camp beckoned. Preparing to leave, he yanked on his poncho and hefted his gun. To warm his ears, he pulled up his hood. There it was! On the top of his head, melting in the rain like a scoop of ice cream left in the sun.

Poor Edwin will not soon forget this day; he walked seven miles before coming across enough water to get cleaned up. Though I fear he was in no humor to be thinking much beyond himself, we can only hope he did not wash directly in the stream. To keep pollutants from entering the waterways, it’s important to use a bucket to haul wash water well above the high water line of spring runoff. But I digress, and this topic is covered thoroughly in the next chapter. For now, back to techniques.

At eighty-six years old, my dear Uncle Ernie cautioned old people fearful of toppling over while squatting (old people?) to steady themselves by holding onto a branch or tree trunk. My theory is to find a place to sit: I’m really Charles, the sitting dreamer, in disguise.

If you are a good squatter and also in a hurry, perhaps to chase a caribou or click off pictures of the sunset, you might try a technique perfected by one of our elected U.S. officials. We’ll call him Jonathan the Deer Hunter, and, I might add, the Ham. His is a rare performance, an adagio of fluid motion and perfect balance. One night after midnight at the tail end of a venison barbecue bash, I mentioned I was writing this book and received a mock demonstration on the living room rug.

Sinking into a hang ten surfboard pose — knees bent and arms outstretched from the shoulder — Jonathan scrapes a trench four to five inches deep with the heel of one cowboy boot (this works only where the earth is fairly soft). Instructing

those of us now left in the living room, he suggests dropping your jeans (and drops his) either to just below your hips or all the way to your ankles, pointing out that folds of material are uncomfortable when bunched up in the bend at the back of your knee. After squat-straddling the ditch for as long as it takes, he drops in his paper and shoves the excavated dirt back into the trough with the instep of his boot. In finale, he packs the dirt down the way any good gardener would finish planting a tree. It was a marvelous performance, I had to agree, except for the toilet paper in the hole — the telltale sign of humans on the planet. We'll discuss this later.

From the depths of a lumpy sleeping bag, from the middle of many a wilderness campsite, has come this sort of question, accompanied by a bit of a whine: "Herbert? Whaddo I do if I have to go in the middle of the night?" Secretly, Herbert might have an identical first-timer question himself, so I'll answer this one for him.

Unless there's a full moon or you have the nocturnal instincts of the snails that go for my petunias, carry a flashlight for those midnight jaunts. As much as I dislike anything resembling civilization in the boondocks, I will concede that in unfamiliar terrain, a tiny light bulb can prevent a stubbed toe, a cracked head — when you trip and pitch over the cliff — or, more commonly, two weeks of the itchy crotch-crazies from lurking poison oak. Many contributors to this book have confessed to one of those "I hoped I wouldn't live long enough to tell the story" stories. Poison oak seems to be the most common misadventure of night squatting.

One further caution: make it a *small* flashlight. The searchlight variety is overkill and can predispose the body to more permanent damage from irate fellow campers. There's nothing like waking up in the middle of peaceful nowhere to someone crashing through the bushes with their high beams and a roll of toilet paper.

Observant caution is always the recommended approach in selecting a place to relieve oneself. Poison oak is not the only dastardly culprit abroad. As my friend Ma Prudence Barker notes, one cannot just plop down with wild abandon in any old daisy field — especially a daisy field — and hope to escape unscathed. Ma once knew a logger named Lloyd who

experienced the unequivocal misery of being nailed by a bumble bee smack on the family jewels. Logger Lloyd swore the pain was worse than any chainsaw nick, bullet hole, or careless imprint of spiked Currins Caulk tearing into flesh.

It is prudent to inspect any area for hazards where you plan to sit down bare-assed. You wouldn't want to become an outdoor casualty as did the subject of this poem by Shirley Vogler Meister.

### *The Ex-Camper*

*Though city-bred, he learned to camp  
and loved to trek in dew and damp  
until a creeping critter found  
him crouching with his denims down.*

Snakes are notorious for sleeping tucked under rocks and logs. Ants run around everywhere. And there are places in the world, as the noted writer and explorer Tom Cahill discovered, where a person can't squat without carrying a big stick to beat off the local pigs. Always check around for damage you might incur, and check for any damage you might inflict.

One morning on the Owyhee River in Oregon, our party had already broken camp, loaded the boats, and tied down everything securely. We were standing ready to push off into the current when it became apparent to me that the morning's coffee had arrived at the end of its course through my innards.

"Wait, wait," I cried to everyone and raced up the bank. I wound through the jumble of boulders until a convenient rock presented itself. Yanking down my shorts, I sat down and began watering the face of the rock.

Now the southeastern corner of Oregon is home to the chukar, a relative of the partridge. This chunky, chicken-like bird is saddled with a reputation for being absurdly stupid and has the added hereditary misfortune of a lunatic voice. A cuckoo bird with the hiccups couldn't sound sillier. Audubon calls the chukar a "hardy game bird that can outrun a hunter (first flying uphill, then flying down)." It's been more my experience that if you decide upon a chukar for dinner, you could walk right up to one, hand it a stone, and it would agreeably hit itself over the head for you. Combine the bird's inability for anything resembling graceful

flight with its darting, quickstepping motion reminiscent of an old-time movie, add long hours spent ridiculously burping its own name, and the chukar becomes cause for much amusement.

Still propped on the rock, I was appreciating a final glance around one of my favorite river camps while enjoying the pleasure of a shrinking bladder. Suddenly there came a loud, crazed *chuk-karr chuk-karr*. A great flapping motion arose from between my knees, convulsed into my face, and then vanished. I knelt down before the wet rock. Tucked beneath a small overhang, behind a clump of grass, I found a precious woven nest holding eight warm eggs — now lakefront property on the edge of a puddle of piss. In one great swoop of karma, all my abusive snickering and pompous guffawing, my enjoyment at the expense of this poor species of fowl, had come home to roost and I felt terrible. Atop a nearby boulder after her fit of apoplexy, the ruffled mother sat staring at me. While heading back to the beach, I chided the powers that be for not giving me a more acute sense of smell or hearing — in the absence of experience — and resolved to do more vigorous battle with my ignorance.



Most of the foregoing stories are worst-case scenarios. I have recounted them not to scare you out of the woods, but to acknowledge the real perils and suggest how to work around them. Life itself is a risk; you could trip headlong over your own big toe or swallow your breakfast down the wrong pipe any day of the week. And have you *ever* tried to locate a toilet downtown — a task fraught with more frustration than any possible misfortune outdoors? Someone (not me) really needs to produce instructions for how to shit in the city.

I'll just say this: Disasters of elimination in the city can be more excruciatingly humiliating than those in the bush. Sometimes I think storekeepers, clerks, and tellers all must be terribly regular, "going" at home in the morning and then not needing a *terlit* (as my grandmother from Brooklyn would have said) for the rest of the day. If there is a stinking, grime-coated john tucked away in the far reaches of a musty storeroom, for some reason this information is as heavily guarded as the most clandestine revolutionary plans. In tramping around town, I've all too often encountered locked doors, scribbled *Out of Order* signs, *Employees Only* plaques, or "I'm sorry we don't have one"

fibers. Sometimes, the only recourse is to streak for home and hope to get there in time. I'll take the backcountry, thanks.

So, get on out there. Find a place of privacy, a "place of easement" as the Elizabethans knew it. Find a panoramic view — one that can't be had with a Liberty quarter and the half turn of a stainless steel handle. Go for it!