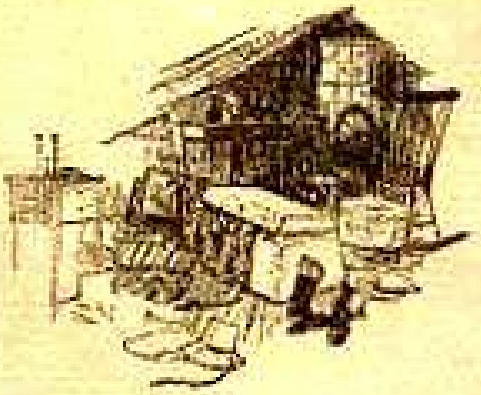
DWELLERS IN ARCADY

The Story of an Abandoned Farm

By Albert Bigelow Paine



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DWELLERS

IN ARCADY

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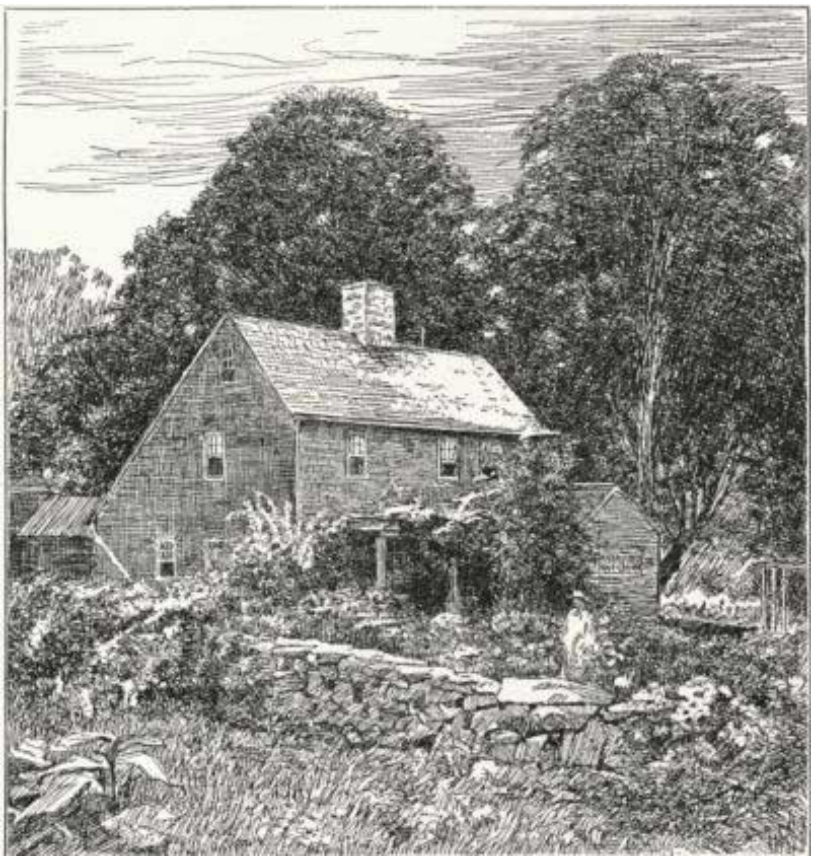

Once more it was a habitation and a home

DWELLERS IN ARCADY

The Story of an Abandoned Farm

Albert Bigelow Paine

Author of **"from van-dweller to commuter"**

"the ship-dwellers" "the tent dwellers"

etc.

with Illustrations by

Thomas Fogarty

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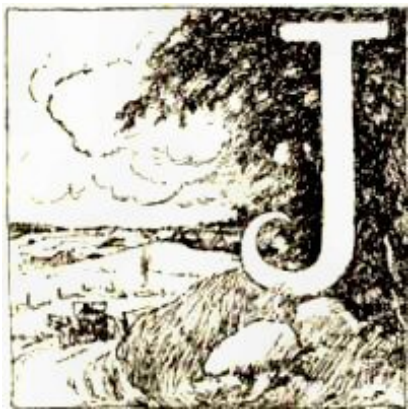
CHAPTER ONE

I

All my life I had dreamed of owning a brook



ust below the brow of the hill one of the traces broke (it was in the horse-and-wagon days of a dozen years or so ago), and, if our driver had not been a prompt man our adventure might have come to grief when it was scarcely begun. As it was, we climbed on foot to the top, and waited while he went into a poor old wreck of a house to borrow a string for repairs.

We wondered if the house we were going to see would be like this one. It was of no special design and it had never had a period. It was just a [Pg 2] house, built out of some one's urgent need and a lean purse. In the fifty years or so of its existence it had warped and lurched and become sway-backed and old—oh, so old and dilapidated—without becoming in the least antique, but just dismal and disreputable—a veritable pariah of architecture. We thought this too bad, for the situation, with its view down a little valley and in the distance the hazy hills, was the sort of thing that, common as it is in Connecticut, never loses its charm. Never mind, we said, perhaps "our house" would have a view, too.

But then our trace was mended and we went along—happily, for it was sunny weather and summer-time, and, though parents of a family of three, we were still young enough to find pleasure in novelty and a surprise at every turn. Our driver was not a communicative spirit, but we drew from him that a good many houses were empty in this part —"people dead or gone away, and city folks not begun to come yet"—he didn't know why, for it was handy enough to town—sixty [Pg 3] miles by train—and a nice-enough country, and healthy—just overlooked, he guessed.

We agreed readily with this view; we were passing, just then, along a deep gorge that had a romantic, even dangerous, aspect; we descended to a pretty valley by a road so crooked that twice it nearly crossed itself; we followed up a clear, foaming little river to a place where there was a mill and a waterfall, also an old-fashioned white house surrounded by trees. Just there we crossed a bridge and our driver pulled up.

"The man you came to see lives here," he said. "The house is ahead, up the next hill."

"The man" must have seen us coming, for the door opened and he came through the trees, a youngish, capable-looking person who said he was the same to whom we had written—that is to say, Westbury—

William C. Westbury, of Brook Ridge, Fairfield County.

Had we suspected then how large a part of our daily economies William C. Westbury was soon to become we should have given him a closer inspection. However, he did not devote himself to us. He [Pg 4] appeared to be on terms of old acquaintance with our driver, climbed into the front seat beside him, and lost himself in news from the outlying districts. The telephone had not then reached the countryside, and our driver brought the latest bulletins. The death of a horse in Little Boston, the burning of a barn in Sanfordtown, the elopement of an otherwise estimable lady with a peddler, marked the beginning of our intimacy with the affairs of Brook Ridge.

The hill was steep, and in the open field at one side a little cascade leaped and glistened as it went racing to the river below.

"That's the brook that runs through your farm," Mr. Westbury said, quite casually, in the midst of his interchanges with the driver.

"Our farm!" I felt a distinct thrill. And a brook on it! All my life I had dreamed of owning a brook.

"Any trout in it?" I ventured, trying to be calm.

"Best trout-brook in the township. Ain't it, Ed?"—to the driver. [Pg 5]

"Has that name," Ed assented, nodding. "I never fish, myself, but I've seen some good ones they said come out of it."

We were up the hill by this time, and Mr. Westbury waved his hand to a sloping meadow at the left.

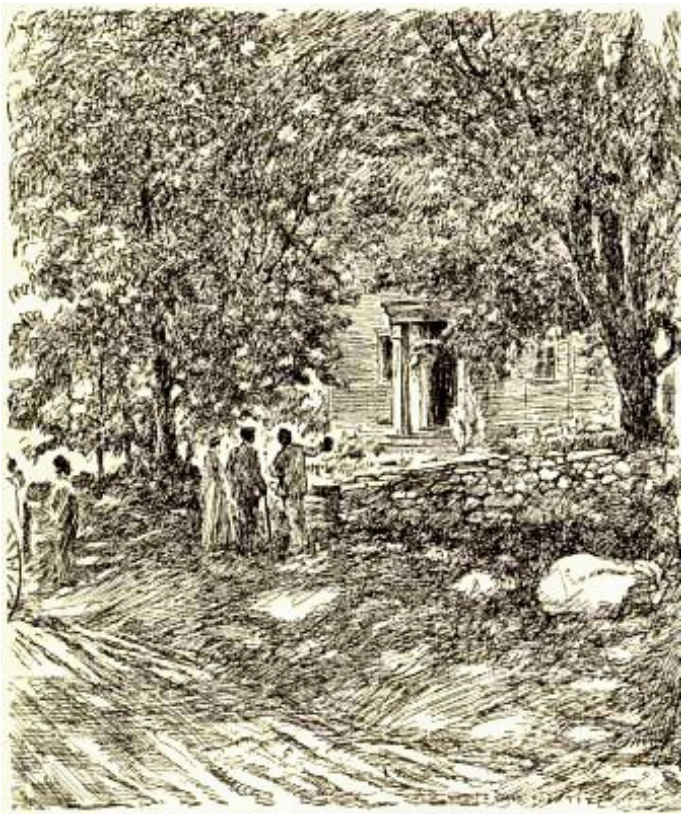
"That's one of the fields. Over there on the right is some of your timber, and up the hill yonder is the rest of it. Thirty-one acres, more or less. The brook runs through all of it—crosses the road yonder where you see that bridge."

I could feel my pulse getting quicker. There was no widely extended view, but there was a snug coziness about these neighborly meadows and wooded slopes, with the brook winding between; this friendly [Pg 6] road with its ancient stone walls, all but concealed now by a mass of ferns or brake on one side, and on the other by a tangle of tall grass, goldenrod, purple-plumed Joe Pye weed, wild grape with big mellowing clusters, wild clematis in full bloom. New England in summer-time! What other land is like it? Our brook, our farm, here in the land of our fathers! There were a warmth, a glow, a poetry in the thought that cannot be put down in words—something to us new and wonderful, yet as old as human wandering and return.

But then all at once we were pulling up abreast of two massive maple-

trees and some stone steps.

"And here is your house," said William C. Westbury.



"And here is your house," said William C. Westbury

II

Ghosts like good architecture

I believe I cannot quite give to-day my first impression of the house. In the years that have followed it has blended into so many other impressions that I could never be sure I was getting the right one. I had better confine myself to its physical appearance and what was perhaps a reflex impression—say, number two. [Pg 7]

One glance was enough to show that it was all that the other old house was not. It did not sag, or lurch, or do any of those disreputable things. It stood up as straight and was as firm on its foundations as on the day when its last hand-wrought nail had been driven home, a century or so before. No mistaking its period or architecture—it was the long-roofed salt-box type, the first Connecticut habitation that followed the pioneer cabin; its vast central chimney had held it unshaken during the long generations of sun and storm.

Not that it was intact—oh, by no means. Its wide weather-boards were broken and falling; the red paint they had once known had become a mere memory, its shingles were moss-grown and curling, the grass was uncut. The weeds about the entrances and rotting well-curb grew tall and dank; the appearance of things in general was far from gay. [Pg 8] Clouds had overcast the sky, and on that dull afternoon a sort of still deadliness hung about the premises. No cheap, common house can be a haunted house. Ghosts like good architecture, especially when it has become pretty antique, and they have a passion for neglected door-yards. The place lacked nothing that I could see to make it attractive to even the most fastidious wandering wraith. As I say, I think this was not my first impression, but certainly it was about the next one, and I could see by her face that it was Elizabeth's.

"Place wants trimming up," said Mr. Westbury, producing a big brass key, "and the house needs some work on it, but the frame is as sound as ever it was. Been standing there going on two hundred years—hewn oak and hard as iron. We'll go inside."

We climbed down rather silently. I felt a tendency to step softly, for fear of waking something. The big key fitted the back door, and we followed Mr. Westbury. He told us, as we entered, that the place [Pg 9] belonged to his wife and her sister—that they had been born there; also, their father, their grandmother, and their great-grandfather, which was as far back as they knew, though the house had always been in the family. Through a little hallway we entered a square room of considerable size. It had doors opening into two smaller rooms, and to one much larger—long and low, so low that, being a tall person, my hair brushed the plaster. Just in the corner where we entered there was an astonishingly big fireplace to which Mr. Westbury waved a sort of salute.

"There is a real antique for you," he said.

There was no question as to that. The opening, which included a Dutch oven, was fully seven feet wide, and the chimney-breast no less than ten. The long, narrow mantel-shelf was scarcely a foot below the ceiling. It took our breath a little—it was so much better than anything we had hoped for. We forgot that this was a haunted house. It had become all at once a sort of a dream house in which mentally we began placing all the ancient furnishings we had been gathering since [Pg 10] our far-off van-dwelling days. There was a big hole in the plaster, but it was a small matter. We hardly saw it. What we saw was the long, low room, with its wide wainscoting and quaint double windows, and ranged about its walls—restored and tinted down to match—our low bookshelves; on the old oak floor were our mellow rugs, and here and there tables and desk and couches, with deep easy-chairs gathered about a wide open fire of logs. Oh, there is nothing more precious in this world than the dream of a possibility like that, when one is still young enough, and strong enough to make it come true!

"This was the kitchen in the old days," Mr. Westbury said. "They cooked over the fire and baked in that oven. Old Uncle Phineas Todd, over at Lonetown, who is ninety years old, and remembers when his mother cooked that way, says that nothing has ever tasted so good since as the meat and bread that came out of those ovens. The meat was rich with juice and the bread had a crust on it an inch thick. That [Pg 11] would be seventy-five years ago, and it's about that long, I guess, since this one was used." Mr. Westbury opened a door to another square room of considerable size. "This was their best room," he said. "They opened the front door only for funerals and weddings. I was married over there in that corner twelve years ago. That was the last wedding. My wife's father lived here till last year. That was the last funeral. He was eighty-five when he died. People get to be old folks up here."

There was a smaller fireplace in this room, and another in a little room behind the chimney, and still another in the first we had entered—four in all—one on each side of the great stone chimney-base. For the most part the walls seemed in good condition—the plaster having been made from oyster shells, Westbury said, hauled fifteen miles from Long Island Sound.

We returned to the long, low room and climbed the stair to a sort of half-room—unfinished, the roof sloping to the eaves. Westbury called it the kitchen-chamber, and it led to bedrooms—a large one and three [Pg 12] small ones. Also, to a tiny one which in our dream we promptly converted into a bath-room. Then we climbed still another stair—a tortuous, stumbling ascent—to the attic.

We had expected it to be an empty place, of dust, cobwebs, and darkness. It was dusty enough and none too light, but it was far from empty. Four spinning-wheels of varying sizes were in plain view between us and the front window. A dozen or more of black, straight-backed chairs of the best and oldest pattern were mingled with a mass of other ancient relics—bandboxes, bird-cages, queer-shaped pots and utensils, trenchers, heaps of old periodicals, boxes of

trinkets, wooden chests of mystery—a New England garret collection such as we had read of, but never seen, the accumulation of a century and a half of time and change. We looked at it greedily, for we had long ago acquired a hunger for such drift as that, left by the human tide. I said in a dead, hopeless tone:

"I suppose it will all be taken away when the place is sold." [Pg 13]

William C. Westbury sighed. "Oh yes, we'll clear out whatever you don't care for," he said, gloomily, "but it all goes with the house, if anybody wants it."

I gasped. "The—the spinning-wheels and the—the chairs?"

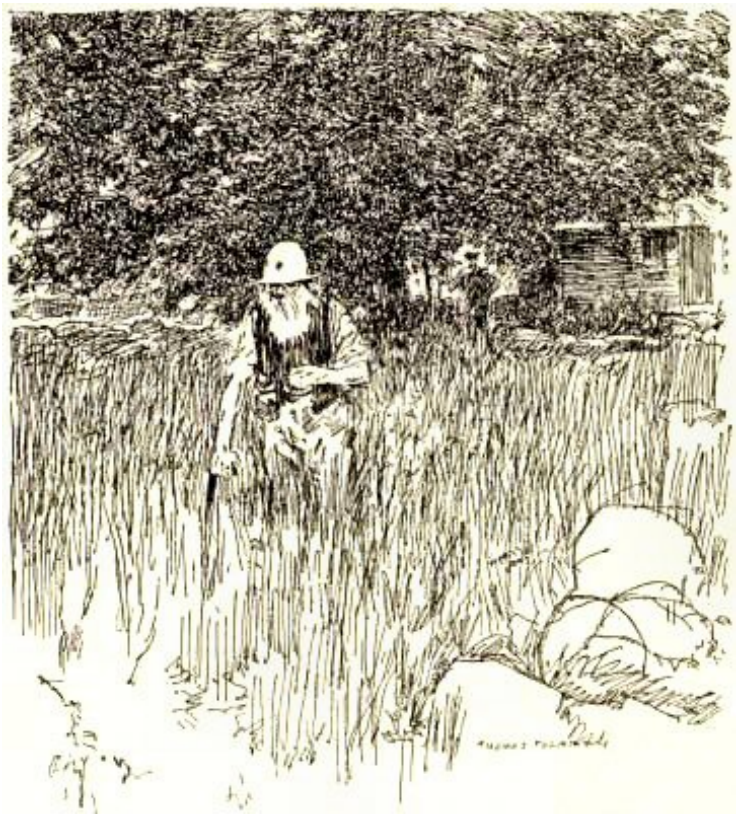
"Everything—just as it is. We've got an attic full of such truck down the hill now—from *my* family. I've hauled around about all that old stuff I ever want to."

Our dream began to acquire extensive additions. We saw ourselves on rainy days pulling over that treasure-house, making priceless discoveries. Reluctantly we descended to the door-yard, taking another glance at the rooms as we went down. We whispered to each other that the place certainly had great possibilities, but it was mainly the attic we were thinking of.

We went outside. Somehow the door-yard seemed a good deal brighter, and we agreed that an hour or two's brisk exercise with a scythe would work wonders. We walked down to the brook, and Mr. Westbury pulled back the willows from the swift water, and something darted away—trout, he said, and if he had declared them to weigh a pound apiece we should have accepted his appraisal, for we were still under the spell of that magic collection up there under the roof and his statement that everything went with the house. [Pg 14]

The price for the thirty-one acres—"more or less," as the New England deeds phrase it, for there are no exact boundaries or measurements among those hoary hills—with the house, which for the moment seemed to us mainly composed of attic and contents, though we still remembered the long, low room and spacious fireplaces; a barn—I was near forgetting the barn, though it was larger than the house, and as old and solid; the trout-brook; the woods; the meadow; the orchard—all complete was (ah, me! I fear those days are gone!) a thousand dollars, and I cannot to this day understand how we ever got away without closing the trade. I suppose we wanted to talk about it awhile, and bargain, for the years had brought us more prudence than money. In the end we agreed on nine hundred, and went up one day to "pass papers"—which we did after taking another look at the attic, to make certain that it was not just a dream, after all. I remember the transaction quite clearly, for it rained that day, world without end, and Elizabeth and I, caught in a sudden shower, made for a great tree and had shelter under it while the elements raged about us. How young we must have been to make it all seem so novel and delightful! I recall that we discussed our attic and what we would do with the fireplace room, as we stood there getting wet to the skin. We had found [Pg 15]

accommodations at a neighbor's, and we decided to remain a few days and make some plans. We were so engrossed that we hardly knew when the rain was over.



It was about sunset when I walked up alone for a casual look at our new possession. It was still and deserted up there, and as the light faded into dusk, the ancient overgrown place certainly had an air about it that was not quite canny. I decided that I would not remain any longer, and was about to go when I noticed an old, white-haired man standing a few feet away. I had heard no step, and his pale, grave face was not especially reassuring. I began to feel goose-flesh. [Pg 16]

"G-good evening," I said.

He nodded and advanced a step. I noticed that he limped, and I had been told that my predecessor who had passed away the year before at eighty-five had walked in that way. [Pg 17]

"Don't pay too much for this place," he said, in a hollow, solemn voice. "Don't pay too much. It was 'prised in the settlement at nine hundred, and it tain't wuth any more."

"I—I've already bought it," I said, weakly.

"Yeh didn't pay more 'n nine hundred, did yeh?" he questioned, anxiously.

"No, I didn't pay more than that."

"I'm glad," he said, "for it wasn't 'prised any more. I like to see things in this world done fair. When yeh git moved I'll come to see yeh again. Good night."

He limped through the long grass and disappeared over the hill. On the way down I stopped at the Westbury home and reported my visitor. Mrs. Westbury, a handsome, spirited woman, laughed.

"That was old Nat, who lives just back of you. He's a good old body, but queer."

[Pg 18]

"I'm glad he's a body," I said. "I wasn t sure."

III

Our debt to William C. Westbury

Before going deeper into this history I think I ought definitely to introduce William C. Westbury, who sold us the place. How few and lagging would have been our accomplishments without Westbury; how trifling seems our repayment as I review the years. Not only did he sell us the house, but he made its habitation possible; you will understand this as the pages pass.

Westbury was a native of natives. By a collateral branch he, like his wife, had descended from our original owners, the ancient and honorable Meeker stock, who had acquired from the Crown a grant of one of the long lots (so called because, although of limited width, they had each a shore front on Long Island Sound) a fifteen-mile stretch of wood and hill and running water. His own homestead at the foot of the hill—the old-fashioned white house already mentioned—had been built a generation or two after ours, when with prosperity, or at least the means of easier accomplishment, the younger stock had gone in for a more pretentious setting. [Pg 19]

Whatever there was to know about Brook Ridge, Westbury knew—an all-wide Providence could scarcely know more. He knew every family, its history and inter-relationships. His favorite diversion was to take up and pursue some genealogical thread, to follow its mazy meanderings down the generations, dropping in curious bits of unwritten history—some of it spicy enough, some of it boisterously funny, some of it somber and gruesome, but all of it alive with the very color and savor of the land that was a part of himself, his inheritance from the generations of sturdy pioneers. Possibly Westbury's history was not always authentic, but if at times he drew on his imagination he tapped a noble source, for his narrative flowed clear, limpid, refreshing, and inexhaustible. When the days grew cooler and a fire was going in the big chimney, Westbury would drop in and, pulling up a big chair, would take out his knife and, selecting a soft, straight-grained piece of pine kindling, would whittle and look into the fire while he unwound the skein that threaded through the years from Azariah Meeker, or Ahab Todd, down to the few and scattering remnants that still flecked the huckleberry hills. [Pg 20]

But I run ahead of my story—it is a habit. It was Westbury's practical knowledge that first claimed our gratitude. It was complete and infallible. He knew every horse and horned beast and vehicle in the township, and had owned most of them, for he was an inveterate trader. He knew their exact condition and capabilities, and those of their owners—where we could get just the right man and team to do our fall plowing; where we could hire a yoke of oxen if needed; where, in the proper season, we could buy a cow. He introduced me to a man whose specialty was cutting brush, because he had heavy, stooped shoulders and preternaturally long, powerful arms—a sort of

anthropoid specimen who wielded a keen one-handed ax that cut a sizable sapling clean through at one stroke. He produced a carpenter properly qualified for repairs on an old house, because he had always lived in one and had been repairing it most of the time since childhood. He found us the right men to clean our well, to do our painting, to trim and rehabilitate our frowsy door-yard. He took me in his buggy to see some of these men; the rest he sent for. If you have ever undertaken a job like ours you have a pretty good idea of our debt to William C. Westbury. [Pg 21]

And this was not all—oh, by no means! Westbury kept cows, in those days, and made an almost daily trip with milk to the nearest sizable town, by virtue of which he became the natural purchasing agent of the thousand and one things we needed in that day of our beginning, and the most reliable and efficient I have ever known. Nothing was too small or too big for Westbury to remember, and I can see him now swing his team up to the front step and hear him call out, "Hey, there!" as a preparation to unloading crockery and tinware, dry-goods and notions, garden tools and food-stuff, his wagon full, his pockets full, without ever an oversight or a poor selection. If you have ever lived in the country you know what a thing like that is worth. It was my opinion that Westbury was a genius, and he has since proved it. [Pg 22]

But I am still going too fast. The family did not immediately come to Brook Ridge, and perhaps I should say here that the "family," besides Elizabeth, consisted of three hardy daughters, whom I shall name as the Pride, the Hope, and the Joy, aged twelve, seven, and two, respectively. They were boarding at a pleasant farm some twenty miles away, and it was thought advisable for them to remain there with Elizabeth a week or such a matter while I came over and stopped with Westbury and his capable wife, to get things started.

IV

Those were lovely days

My impression is that our carpenter came first, though the exact sequence is unimportant. He was not exclusively a carpenter, being also a farmer during a considerable portion of the year. He would have to knock off, now and then, he said, to look after his corn and potatoes, while his assistant, it appeared, served in the double capacity of helper and hired man. [Pg 23]

But they were a suitable team for the work in hand—reconstruction on an old house that had been put up mainly with an ax and a trowel, by thumb measure, having probably never known anything so prosaic as a spirit-level and a square. We began on the large room—that is to say, the old kitchen, which was to be the new living-room, and in a very little while had the prehistoric pantry and sink ripped out and the big hole patched in the plaster, for our boss carpenter was a gifted man, qualified for general repairs.

No, on second thought, we did not rip out quite all the old pantry. There were some whitewood shelves that had been put there to stay, and in the century or so of their occupancy appeared to have grown to the other woodwork. Considering them a little, and the fact that it would require an ax and perhaps dynamite to dislodge them, I had an inspiration. Modified a little, they would make excellent bric-à-brac and book shelves and serve a new and beautiful use through all the centuries we expected to live there. I feverishly began drawing designs, and the chief carpenter and I undertook this fine-art and literary corner at once, so that it might be finished and a surprise for Elizabeth and the others when they came. It was well that we did so, for it was no light matter to reduce the width of those shelves. Whitewood is not hard when fresh, but this had seasoned with the generations until it was as easy to saw as dried horn—just about—and we took turns at it, and the sweat got in my eyes, and I would have sent for the ax and the dynamite if I hadn't passed my word. [Pg 24]

Meantime, the helper, whose name was Henry Jones, was hewing an oaken cross-beam which supported the ceiling, and which I could not pass under without violently knocking my head. I am satisfied that the original builders of that house were short people, or they would have planned the old kitchen a few inches higher. But then I am always knocking my head nearly off against something. I have left gleanings from it on the sharp edges of a thousand swinging signs and on the cruel filigree of as many low-hung chandeliers. My slightly bald spot, due to severe mental effort, or something, if examined closely would be found to resemble an old battlefield in France. But this is digression. As I was saying, Henry Jones was hewing at the big old cross-beam, trying to raise its lower sky-line a couple of inches with a foot-adz. I had not supposed that the job would be especially difficult. I did not realize that the old white-oak beam in a century and a half had [Pg 25]

petrified. We were having a pretty toilsome time with our shelves, but I never saw a man sweat and carry on like Henry Jones. He had to work straight up, with his head tipped back, and his neck was rather short, with no proper hinge in it. Besides, it was August, and pretty still and intense, and then some bees that had taken up residence between the floors did not like the noise he made, and occasionally [Pg 26] came down to see about it. At such times he made what was in the nature of a spring for the door, explaining later that he had been to sharpen his adz. During quieter moments I went over, at his suggestion, to measure up and see if the beam wasn t high enough. It was on the afternoon of the second day that I told him that if he would now trim up and round off the corners a little I thought I might be able to pass under it without butting my remaining brains out. You never saw a man so relieved. I think he considered me over-particular about a small matter. As a reward I set him to elevating the beam across the top of the door leading to the kitchen—quite an easy job. He only had to put in a few hours of patient overhead sawing and split out the chunks with wedges and a maul.

Observing Henry Jones though fully, I became convinced that the oaken frame of our house was nearly indestructible. When I found time I examined its timbers rather carefully. They were massive as to size, hand hewn, and held together with big wooden pins. No worm [Pg 27] had been indiscreet enough to tackle those timbers. The entire structure was anchored in the masonry of the huge chimney, and as a whole was about as solid as the foundations of the world. There were builders in those days.

I have mentioned the "ancient mariner" who appeared in the dusk of the evening to warn me against over-payment for the place—old Nat. It turned out that he was a farmer, but with artistic leanings in the direction of whitewash. He appeared one morning in a more substantial form, and was presently making alabaster of our up-stairs ceilings, for if ever there was an old master in whitewash it was Nat. Never a streak or a patchy place, and he knew the secret of somehow making the second coat gleam like frosting on a wedding-cake.

Things were happening all about. Old Pop, the brush-cutter, had arrived, with his deadly one-handed ax, and was busy in the lower brook lot—a desperate place of briers and brush and poison ivy. He was a savage worker. The thorns stung him to a pitch of fighting [Pg 28] madness, and he went after them, careless of mishap. Each evening he came up out of that vicious swamp, bleeding at every pore, his massive shoulders hunched forward, his super-normal arms hanging until his huge hands nearly swept the ground.

Pop in action was a fascinating sight. Few things could be finer than to see him snatch away a barbed-wire entanglement of blackberry-bushes, clutch a three-inch thorn sapling with his hairy left, and with one swing of his terrible right cut the

taproot through. I had figured that it would take a month to clear away that mess along the brook, but on the evening of the fifth day Pop had the last bit of its tangle cut and piled. Of such stuff were warriors of the olden time. Given armor and a battle-ax, and nothing could have stood before him. One could imagine him at Crecy, at Agincourt, at Patay. Joan of Arc would have kept him at her side.

[Pg 29]

Pop had another name, but everybody called him "Old Pop" and he seemed to prefer it. He was seventy years old and a pensioner. There was a week when his check came that he did no work, but remained dressed up, and I fear did not always get the worth of his money. Never mind, he had earned relaxation. An ancient hickory-tree in the brook meadow had been broken by a March storm. Old Pop and his son Sam had it cut, split, and sawed into fireplace lengths in a little while. That is, comparatively. I think they were two or three days at it, while it had taken nature a full hundred and sixty years to get the old tree ready for them. I counted the rings. The figures impressed me.

[Pg 30]

It was—let us say—as old as the old house. It had been a straight young tree of thirty years or so when the Revolutionary began, and it saw the recruits of Brook Ridge march by to join Putnam, who had a camp on a neighboring hill. There were Reeds and Meekers and Burrs and Todds and Sanfords in that little detachment, and their uniforms were not very uniform, and their knapsacks none too well filled. There was no rich government behind them to vote billions for defense, no camps that were cities sprung up in a night, no swift trains to whirl them to their destination. Where they went they walked, through dust or mud and over the stony hills. The old tree saw them pass—in its youth and theirs—and by and by saw them return—fewer in numbers, and foot-sore, but triumphant. I mentioned it to Pop. He said:

"Yeah—I was in the Civil War. It wa'n't much fun, but I'm lookin' for my pension to be increased next year."

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When there was no more brush or chopping I set Pop to laying stone wall and said I would employ him steadily for a year. But that was a mistake. Old Pop was a free lance, a knight errant. Anything that savored of permanency smelled to him of vassalage. He laid a rod of stone wall—solid wall that will be there for Gabriel to stand on when he plays his last trump—blows it, I mean—in that neighborhood. But then he collected, one evening, and vanished, and I did not see him any more. I never carried the wall any farther. As Pop left it, so it remains to this day.

My plowman was a young man—a handsome, high-born-looking youth who came one Sunday evening to

arrange terms. He was stylishly dressed, and I took him for a college lad on vacation. He assured me, however, that his schooling had been acquired in the neighborhood, that he was a farmer on his own account, with a team of his own, and that he was accustomed to plowing rocky land. His name was Luther Merrill, and if I had thought him handsome in his fine clothes, I considered him really superb when he arrived next morning in work attire and started his great plow and big white horses around the furrows. There had been a shower in the night and the summer foliage was fresh—the leaves shining. Against a gleaming green background of maple, alder, and wild clematis, Luther Merrill in shirt and trousers, his collar open, his sleeves turned back, bending to the plow and calling directions to his sturdy team, was something to make one's heart leap for joy. I photographed him unobserved. I longed to paint him.

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My admiration grew as I observed the character of his plowing. A Western boy wouldn't have stood it five minutes. The soil was at least half stone, and the stones were not all loose. Every other rod the plow brought up with a jerk that nearly flung the plowman over the top of it. Then he had to yank and haul it out, lift it over, and start again. He did not lose his temper, even when he broke one of his plow points, of which, it seemed, he had brought a supply, in anticipation. He merely called something encouraging to his horses and went on. I know about plowing, and I once plowed a small blackberry-patch that was mostly roots, and nearly swore my teeth loose in the half a day it took me. But that had been nothing to this, and this was continual. I decided that nothing could feaze Luther Merrill.

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Still, he was not absolute proof against bees. I have mentioned the swarm between the floors of the old house, and in the course of the morning Luther's plowing took him near the corner where it seems they had their entrance. It was a bright, hot day and they were quite busy, but not busy enough to prevent them from giving prompt attention to us as we came along.

I was holding one handle of the plow at the moment, pretending to help, when I noticed a peculiar high-pitched note close to my ear, and a certain pungent "mad smell" which bees know how to make. Something told me just then that I had business in the upper corner of the lot and I set out to attend to it. Two of those bees came along. They hurried a good deal—they had to, to keep up with me. I discouraged them as much as possible with an earnest fanning or beating motion and sharp words. I was not entirely successful. I felt something hot and sudden on the lobe of one ear just as I dove beneath the bushes that draped the upper wall, and I had an almost immediate sensation of its becoming hard and pear-shaped.

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I peered out presently to see what had become of Luther Merrill. He had not basely deserted his team—he was too high-class for that, but

he was moving from the point of attack with as little delay as possible, grasping the lines with one hand and pawing the air with the other. By the time I reached him he was plowing in a rather remote corner, and he had lost some of his beauty—one eye was quite closed. He said he would plow down there by the house late in the evening, or on the next wet day.

Luther plowed and harrowed and sowed for us—two fields of rye and timothy mixed, to insure a future meadow, this on Westbury's advice. A part of one field had great boulders in it, which he suggested we take out. I said we would drop the boulders into the brook at intervals to make the pretty falls it now lacked. Next morning, Luther Merrill came with a heavy chain and a stone-boat (an immense sled without runners) and for two happy days we reconstructed the world, dislocating and hauling boulders that had not stirred since the ice age.

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Luther was an expert at chaining out boulders, and he loved the job. When we got one to the brook, and after great prying and grunting finally boosted it in with a mighty splash, Luther would wave his arms, jump about, and laugh like the high-hearted boy that he was. Those were lovely days.

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CHAPTER TWO

I

We carried down a little hair trunk

was in the midst of the improvements mentioned when the family—that is to say, Elizabeth and the girls—arrived on the scene. It was a fine August day—the 21st, to be quite exact—and I borrowed a horse and light wagon from Westbury and drove the three miles of brook and woods and meadow to the station to meet them.

There was just one business house at the station—a general store—and I suddenly found myself deeply interested, in things I had barely noticed heretofore. Why, there was a broom! Sure enough, we would need a broom; also, a rake—that was highly necessary; and a hatchet, and some nails, and a shovel, and a water-pail, and a big galvanized tub, and—by the time the train came it took careful arrangement to fit in the family and the baggage among my purchases. The Pride had to sit on the water-pail, the Joy, aged two, in the galvanized tub, while the Hope, who was seven, sat on a trunk at the back, dangled her legs, waved her arms, and whooped her delight as we joggled along, for the Hope was a care-free, unrestrained soul, and the world to her just a perpetual song and dance.

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They were in a mood to take things as they found them; even the Pride, who at twelve was critical, expressed herself as satisfied with the house, and, with the Hope, presently made a dash for the attic, our story of which had stirred them deeply. It was necessary to restrain them somewhat. In the first place, our attic was not a possession to be pawed over by careless and undiscerning childhood. Besides, it was hot up there under the roof, and gray with the dust of years. It was a place for a cool, rainy day and not for a mid-August afternoon.

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We carried down a little hair trunk with brass nails in it, and under the shade of one of the big maples the "tribe," as we sometimes call them, spread out the treasures of some little old-fashioned girl who long, long ago had put them away for the last time. There were doll dresses, made of the quaint prints of another day, and their gay posy patterns had remained fresh, though the thread of the long childish stitches had grown yellow with the years. They had very full skirts, and waists that opened in front, and there was an apron with a wonderful bib, and a little split sun-bonnet, probably for every-day wear, also another bonnet which must have been for occasions, for its material was silk and it was one of those grand, flaring coal-scuttle affairs such

as fashionable dolls wore a very long time ago. [Pg 39]

The doll was not there. Long since she had gone the way of all dolls; but the Pride and the Hope decked their own dolls in the little old wardrobe, and thought it all delightful and amusing, while we watched them with long thoughts, trying to picture the little girl who had one day put her treasures away to become a young lady, and in time a wife, and a mother, and a grandmother, and was now resting on the sunny slope where the road turns, beyond the hill. Later generations of little girls appeared to have added nothing to the hair trunk. Doubtless they had dolls, with dresses and styles of their own, and trunks of a newer pattern, and had scorned these as being a little out of date. Even the Pride and the Hope would not have permitted their dolls to appear in those gowns in public, I think—at any rate, not in the best society—though carefully preserving them with a view perhaps to fancy-dress occasions.

The Joy was not deeply impressed with the hair trunk. Neither its art nor its sentimental value appealed to her. She had passed something more than two years in our society, and during most of this period had [Pg 40] imagined herself a horse. A fairly level green place, where she could race up and down and whinny and snort and roll was about all she demanded of life; though she had a doll—a sort of a horse's doll—which at the end of a halter went bounding after her during long afternoons of violence.

For the Joy we brought down from the attic a little two-wheeled green doll-buggy, with a phaeton top and a tongue, and this at once became her chief treasure. She hitched herself to it, flung in her doll, and went racing up and down, checked up or running free, until her round, fat face seemed ready to burst, and it became necessary to explain to her that she had arrived at wherever she was going and must stand hitched in the shade till she cooled off. It was a drowsy occupation that summer afternoon. She was presently sitting down—as much as a horse can sit down—and just a little later was stretched among the long grass and clover, forgetful of check-rein and hitching-post. Later, when the three of them were awake at once, they possessed themselves of the [Pg 41] big barn and explored the stalls and tumbled about on the remnant of hay that still remained in one of the mows. Then they discovered the brook, where it flowed clear and cool among the willows at the foot of the door-yard. It was not deep enough to be dangerous, and they were presently wading and paddling to their hearts' content.

The brook, in fact, became one of their chief delights. It was never very warm, but, tempered by August sun and shower, its shady, pleasant waters were as balm to hot bare legs and burning feet. Flowers of many kinds grew along its banks, while below the bridge where it crossed the road there was always a school of minnows eager to be fed, and now and then one saw something larger dart by

—something dark, torpedo-shaped, swift, touched with white along its propellers—a trout. There is no end of entertainment in such things. Summer-time, the country, and childhood—that is a happy combination, and a bit of running water adds the perfect touch.

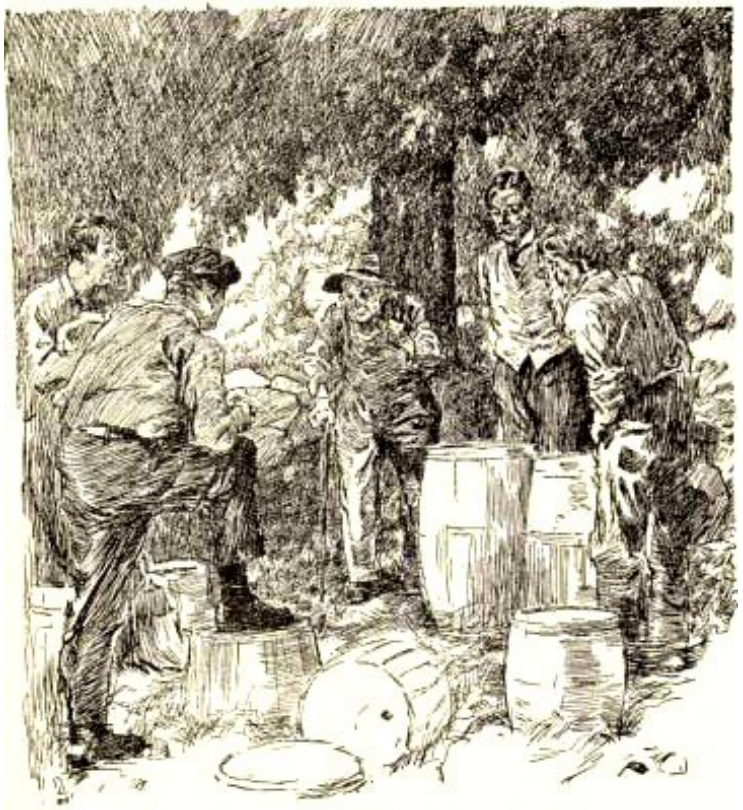
II

Cap'n Ben has an iron door-sill

We did not take full possession of our place immediately. Whatever we had in the way of household effects was in a New York City flat, and one must have a few pots and tin things, even for the simple life. Fortune was good to us: the Westbury household offered us shelter until we were ready to make at least a primitive beginning, and one could not ask better than that. Mrs. Westbury was a famous cook, and Westbury's religion was conveyed in the word plenty. The hospitality and bounty of their table were things from another and more lavish generation. The Joy promptly gave our hosts titles. She called them Man and Lady Westbury, which somehow seemed exactly to fit them. [Pg 43]

Each morning we went up to see what we could find to do, and we never failed to find plenty. I don't remember distinctly as to all of Elizabeth's occupations, but I know she has a mania for a broom and a clothesline. I carry across the years the impression of an almost continuous sweeping sound—an undertone accompaniment to my discussion with carpenter and painter—and I see rows of little unpacked dresses swinging in the sun.

One of my own early jobs was to clean the cellar. It was a sizable undertaking, and I engaged Old Pop's Sam to help me. It was a cellar of the oldest pattern, with no step, having an entrance on a level with the road, the same being a "rollway" wide enough to admit barrels of cider and other produce. I don't know how many had been rolled into it during the century or so before we came, but after a casual look I decided that very few had been rolled out. The place was packed to the doors with barrels, boxes, benches, and general lumber of every description.



They formed a board of appraisal. All of them knew that cellar and were intimately acquainted with its contents

About the time we got started an audience assembled. Old Nat, who was taking a day off, and 'Lias Mullins, who had a weakness in his back and took most of his days off, drifted in from somewhere and sat on the wall in the shade to give us counsel. Then presently W. C. Westbury drove up and became general overseer of the job. They formed a board of appraisal, with Westbury as chairman. All of them knew that cellar and were intimately acquainted with its contents. [Pg 44]

I had thought the old collection of value only as kindling, but as we brought out one selection after another I realized my error.

"That," said 'Lias Mullins, "is Uncle Joe's pork-barrel. It's wuth a dollar fifty new, an that one's better 'n new."

"I used to help Uncle Joe kill, every year," nodded Old Nat, "an' to put his meat away. I remember that bar'l as well as can be. I'll take it myself, if you don't want it.

"Better keep your barrel," Westbury said. "You'll be wanting a pair of pigs next, and then you'll need it." He looked into it reflectively and sounded it with his foot. "Many a good mess of pork that old barrel's had in it," he said. [Pg 45]

The board's ruling being unanimous, the barrel was set aside. Uncle Joe's ham-barrel came next, and was likewise recognized, carefully examined, and accepted by the board. Then two cider-barrels, which awoke an immediate and special interest.

For cider is the New England staple. Its manufacture and preparation

are matters not to be lightly dismissed. Good seasoned cider-barrels have a value in no way related to cooperage. It is the flavor, the bouquet, acquired through a tide of seasons, from apples that grow sweet and rich through summer sun and shower and find a spicy tang in the first October frost. Gathered and pressed on the right day; kept in the right temperature, the mellow juice holds its sweetness and tone far into the winter, and in the oaken staves leaves something of its savor to the contents of another year.

"That's the best cider-cellar I know of," said 'Lias Mullins, "and Uncle Joe allus had the best bar'ls; but they wa'n't used last year, an I'm turrible 'fraid they've gone musty." [Pg 46]

"Shouldn't be su'prised," agreed old Nat, mournfully. "An' it's a great pity."

"Bet you a quarter apiece they're as sweet as ever," proposed Chairman Westbury. He took out a great jack-knife and carefully pried out the bungs. "Smell 'em, 'Lias," he said, yielding precedence to the oldest member.

'Lias Mullins carefully steadied himself with his cane, bent close to the bung-hole of one of the barrels, and took a long and apparently agreeable whiff. Then after due preparation he bent close to the other bung-hole and took another and still longer whiff.

"Seems to me that one's just a leetle bit musty," he said.

"Now, Nat, it's your turn," said Westbury.

Whereupon old Nat, gravely and after due preparation, took a long whiff of first one barrel, then a still longer one of the other barrel. [Pg 47]

"Seems to me it's *t'other* one that's a *leetle trifle* musty," he said.

W. C. Westbury took two short business-like whiffs at each bung.

"Sweet as a nut, both of 'em," he announced, definitely.

That settled it; Westbury was acknowledged authority. Sam rolled out two vinegar-barrels, both pronounced good. Following there came what seemed at least a hundred apple-barrels, potato-barrels, turnip-barrels, ash-barrels, boxes, benches, sections of shelving, and a general heap of debris, some of it unrecognizable even by 'Lias Mullins, oldest member of the board.

"It was a Meeker habit to throw nothing away," commented Westbury, as he looked over the assortment. "No matter what it was, they thought they might want it, some day. You'll find the same thing when you get to the attic."

At this moment Sam discovered in a dark corner a heap of flat slabs that, brought to light, proved to be small tombstones. Westbury grinned.

"Those were put over the cemetery fence," he said, "whenever the relatives bought bigger ones. Uncle Joe brought a lot of them home to [Pg 48]

cool his milk on."

I looked at them doubtfully. They were nothing but stones, and they had served their original purpose. Still, it had been a rather particular purpose and they were carved with certain names and dates. I was not sure that their owners might not sometime—some weird fall evening, say—take a notion to claim them.

They opened the door of history to Westbury. He began to recall connections and events, and related how a certain Hezekiah Lee, whose name was on one of them, had decided, some fifty years before, to give up farming and go to counterfeiting. His career from that moment had been a busy one; he had been always traveling one way or the other between affluence and the penitentiary. His last term had been a long one, and when he got out, styles in national currency had changed a good deal and Uncle Hezekiah couldn't seem to get the hang of the new designs. So he took to preaching, and held camp-meetings. He lived to be eighty-seven, and people had traveled forty miles to his funeral. [Pg 49]

I said I would keep Uncle Hezekiah's headstone. In the end we made an inside walk of the collection, for the old cellar had a dirt floor and was not always dry, but we laid them face down. When we had raked and swept, and brushed and put back the articles accepted by the board, and all was trim and neat, Westbury looked in.

"Looks nice," he said, and added, "that's what you've got now, but by and by you'll have your mess of old truck, too, and the next man will cart a lot of it to the wood-pile, just as you're carting it now."

I said I thought we would begin our career with a coat of whitewash. Westbury noticed something sticking out from an overhead beam, and drew out a long-handled wrought-iron toasting-fork. Looking and prying about, we discovered an old pair of brass snuffers, and a pair of hand-made wrought-iron shears. The old things were pretty rusty, and I could see that Westbury did not value them highly, but I would not have traded them for the pork-barrel and the ham-barrel and all the other barrels and benches reserved from Uncle Joe's collection. [Pg 50] 'Lias Mullins, inspecting them, became reflective:

"Them's from away back in old Ben Meeker's time," he said, "or mebbe furder than that. The' ain't been no scissors made by hand in this country since my time, an' a good while before. I guess old Ben was a good hand to have things made. I've heard my father tell that when he was a boy Cap'n Ben, as they called him, one day found his door-sill split, an' went to the blacksmith shop an' had one made out of iron. Father said it was a big curiosity, and everybody went to look at it. That would be fully a hundred years ago, when the' wasn't so much to talk about. He said that the biggest piece of news in Brook Ridge for a good while was that Cap'n Ben had an iron door-sill. It was around there at the side door. I've seen it many a time, an' for all I know it's there yet."

We went around there. Sure enough! Cap'n Ben's iron door-sill was

still in place. Brown at the ends, bright and thinner where the step came, it remained as firmly fixed as when, a hundred years before, it had supplied the latest bit of gossip to Brook Ridge.

III

The thought of going back to "six rooms and improvements"

Peace of mind is a fleeting thing. We began to be harassed with uncertainty—to suffer with indecision. In buying the old house we had not at first considered making it a year-round residence, but merely a place to put some appropriate furnishings, the things we cared for most, so that we might have them the best part of the year—from April, say, to Thanksgiving. It had not occurred to us that we would cut loose altogether from the town—dynamite our bridges, as it were—and become a part and parcel of Brook Ridge.

Every day, neighbors stopped to make our acquaintance and learn our plans. We interested them, for we were the first new-comers for many a year to that neglected corner of the township. They were the kindest people in the world, moved, perhaps, less by curiosity than by concern for our comfort and happiness. They generally wanted to know how we liked our place, what changes we were going to make in it, and they never failed to ask if we intended to make it our home or merely a place for summer-time.

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Our replies to the last question, at first definite, became vague and qualified, then again definite, for we admitted that we did not know. As a matter of fact, the place was getting hold of us, possessing us, surrounding us on all sides with its fascinations. It was just an old house, a few broken acres, and a brook—just some old lumber and stones, some ordinary trees, some every-day water—not much, perhaps, to get excited over or to change one's scheme of life. Yet we did get excited over it, daily, and it had suddenly become a main factor in our problem of life. The thought of going back to "six rooms and improvements," with clanging bells and crashing wheels, and with an expanse of dingy roofs for scenery, became daily less attractive. True, we would have to spend a good deal more money on the old house to fit it for cold weather, but then there would be the saving in rent.

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We began to discuss the matter—quietly, even casually, at first—then feverishly, positively. We were not always on the same side, and there were moments when a stranger might have thought our relations slightly strained. But this would have been to misjudge our method. We are seldom really violent in argument—though occasionally intense. Besides, we were too much of a mind, now, for real disagreement. We both yearned too deeply to set the old house in complete order, to establish ourselves in it exclusively and live there for ever and ever. Think of Christmas in it, we said, with the great open fires, the snow outside, and a Christmas tree brought in from our own woods!

I said at last that I would make a trip to town, go to the flat, and ship up

a few articles for present use. It would be rather more than a month until our lease expired, and in that time we could decide something. I secretly intended to send up a number of vital things that would make return difficult and costly. I was not going to blow up our entire bridge —I was only going to remove one or two of its necessary arches.

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That was what I did. I went in one morning and packed a barrel or two of important queensware and utensils and a bale of bedding, without which even the best flat becomes a snare and a mockery. When I had seen it in the hands of the expressman I had a feeling that our pretty apartment was no longer home.

I went over to my club for luncheon. A number of my friends were there, and I seized an auspicious moment to announce my purchase and to exhibit a bunch of photographs. They were good fellows who showed a proper interest. Some of them already owned farms—some had farms in prospect. The artists among them agreed that the old house was a pretty fair example of its period and began advising me what to do with it. But, as they did not agree among themselves, the net result was not valuable. Somebody asked what I was going to plant.

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'Rye,' I said.

For some reason everybody laughed.

"All rye? What's the matter with planting a little Scotch?"

It was not much of a joke, but they seemed to enjoy it. They were good fellows, as I have said, but I fear rather light-minded.

When I got back to Brook Ridge and confessed, Elizabeth did not seem surprised. In fact, it was as if I had been merely obeying orders. If there was any further question as to what we were going to do, I do not recall it. Our landlord in town was notified, our farmer-carpenter was consulted as to further alterations. We had definitely cast our fortunes with Brook Ridge.

IV

The soft feet of the rain on the shingles

When the articles I had chosen from the apartment arrived Westbury carted them up the hill and we entered into possession of our new estate—not of the house (some painters had possessed themselves of that), but of the wood-house and barn. The barn was a big, airy place, suitable for a summer dormitory. The wood-house was not big, but it was empty and had been set in order. It had a stove-pipe hole, and Westbury contributed a stove—the first one ever made, he said, or, at any rate, the first ever used in that neighborhood. It was a good stove, too, solidly cast, almost unbreakable. Its legs were gone, which was no great matter, for we set it up on bricks. With a box for a table, we had a proper living-room, handy and complete.

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Not entirely complete, either—the old stove had no pipe. But just then it happened that the groceryman came along, making one of his two trips a week. He would deliver during the afternoon, he said, and could bring along some pipe for us. He did that, but it was a kind of pipe that didn't fit—not very well.

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If there is anything that would make a man forget the Great War it would be putting up stove-pipe. It seems, somehow, to overshadow all other misfortunes. Some persons might have enjoyed matching up those units, but I did not. I have no gift that way. Elizabeth said she would help, but she didn't seem to use good judgment—not the best. When I was making a painfully careful adjustment she was possessed to push a little, or something, and make my efforts futile. Once when the box I was standing on tipped over and I came down, with the pipe resolved into joints, she seemed to think it amusing. At times, too, our tribe of precious ones came racing through. By the time the job was finished Elizabeth and I were treating each other rather coolly—that is to say, politely. But this was temporary. The soft purr of a fresh fire, the pleasant singing of a kettle, set us to laughing at our troubles. Man Westbury came driving up with some green corn, lettuce, and beans from the garden; also a chicken and a pie hot from Lady Westbury's oven. Those blessed neighbors! How good they were to us! In less than no time the corn and beans were in the pot and I was dressing the lettuce. We had brought down some of the old chairs from the attic, and the tribe assembled with a whoop to place them. A little more, and we were seated. The Hope, aged seven, who had a gift for such things, asked a blessing, and we had begun life in the new home. I wonder why tears are trying to come as I write about it. There was never a better meal, or a jollier one—never a happier, healthier family.

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A shower came up and settled into a gentle rain. The barn, where we were going to sleep, was a good step away, so that when the time came we put on our rubbers, took our umbrellas and a lantern, and set out for bed. There was nothing very wonderful about all this, of

course; it only seemed wonderful to us because it was all so new. The Pride and the Hope declared they were always going to sleep in the barn, and when we got inside the big, lofty place, and in the gloom overheard heard the soft feet of the rain on the shingles, I, too, had a deep-down wish that there was nothing in the world, but this—that the pleasant night and soothing patter might never cease.

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Truth obliges me to confess that on that first night our bed was not an entire success. For convenience and economy we had laid it in a continuous stretch on the floor, with some hay beneath. There being not enough mattresses for all, I had built an extension of hay for the elder members of the family. It was the best hay, but I had used it too sparingly. I suppose I had not realized how, with adjustment, it would pack and separate. I know it had hardened considerably by the time I had made one or two turns as a necessary preparation for sleep. I remarked each time how delightful it all was, to which Elizabeth agreed, though she had the courage presently to venture that she didn't think it quite as soft as one of Lady Westbury's feather beds. The Pride observed that there seemed to be a certain horsey smell that did not entirely please her, though the Joy, who was probably imagining herself hitched in one of the stalls, declared that she liked that best of anything. As for the Hope—clear of conscience and worn with the riot of the day—she had plunged without a moment's hesitation into the blessed business of sleep. It engaged us all, at length, and we must have become adapted by morning, for when we were all awake and lay in the dim light, listening to the quiet music of the continuing rain, there was no voice of discontent. Elizabeth thought it likely that she was considerably bruised, but, as she made no complaint later, this was perhaps a false alarm.

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When I crept out and pushed open the wide front doors, I found that the brook had risen and was slipping across the grass of the lower yard. It had a tempting look, and the rain held all but ceased. I picked my way down to it, and, hanging my garments on a limb, enjoyed the richest luxury in the world—that of bathing in the open air, sheltered only by the sky and the greenery, in one's own brook and one's own door-yard. Interlacing boughs, birds singing, the cool, slipping water—no millionaire could have more. I was heir to the best the ages had to give.

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V

Elizabeth's ideas were not poetic

We were busy with our new plans. We decided to shingle the roof, which showed an inclination to leak; also the sides, which in numerous places besides the windows admitted samples of the outdoors. Such things did not matter so much in summer-time, but New England in winter is different. Then the roof and door-yard are piled with snow, the northwest wind seeks out the tiniest crevice in one's armor. How did those long-ago people manage? Their walls [Pg 62] were not sheeted, and they did not know the use of building-paper. Our old wide siding had been laid directly on the bare timbers, the studding; every crevice under the windows, every crack in the plaster, was a short circuit with zero. We decided to take off the antique siding, cut out the bad places, and relay it flat, as sheeting. Over it we would lay building-paper, and on top of this, good substantial shingles, laid wide to the weather in the old-fashioned way.

It hurt us to think of covering up that fine original siding—priceless stuff, a foot wide and of the softest, straightest-grained white pine, cut from large trees such as no longer grow—but we did not know what else to do with it. It was a wonderful antique, but we could not afford to keep a pile of lumber just for exhibition purposes. I said it ought to be in a museum, and I had some thought of offering it to the Metropolitan, at a modest valuation, next time I went to town. Elizabeth discouraged this idea. She suggested that I have it made up into Brook Ridge souvenirs—little trays and paper-cutters—a wagon-load or two, then [Pg 63] start out and peddle them. The scheme dazzled me for a moment, but I resisted it. So in the end it became just sheeting. I did pick out one fine example—a piece with some of the original red paint still on it—and said I meant to have it framed, but in the course of the work, at a moment when my back was turned, the carpenter got hold of it, so I fear there is no exposed scrap of it to-day. It is all there under the shingles, and will still be there for other shingles when those are gone. The nails that held it were made by hand, every one of them, and I did save some of those, for they were really beautiful. But think of the patient labor of making them. I suppose a skilled and rapid workman could turn out as many as twenty of those nails in an hour. A detail like that gives one a sort of measurement of those deliberate days.

We did not always agree as to our improvements. I don t think our arguments ever became heated—one might characterize them as, well, ardent. If Elizabeth thought my ideas sometimes wild, not to say [Pg 64] crazy, I don t remember that she ever put it just in that way. If I thought hers inclined to be prosaic and earthy, I was careful to be out of range and hearing before I expressed myself. I remember once suggesting that we do our cooking and heating entirely in the old way—that is to say, using the fireplaces and the Dutch oven—and was pained to find that Elizabeth was contemplating a furnace and a kitchen range. She asked me rather pointedly who I thought was going to get in wood

enough to keep four fireplaces running, and if I fancied the idea of going to bed in the big north room up-stairs with the thermometer shrinking below zero.

It was still August at the moment, and the prospect was not so disturbing. I said that hardy races always did those things, that the old builders of this house had probably not minded it at all, and just see to what great old ages they had lived. I said that as a child I had even done it myself.

"So did I," said Elizabeth; "that is why I am not going to do it now." [Pg 65]

She walked out with quite a firm step, and I did not pursue the matter. I might have done so, but I had a vision, just then, of a boy who had lived on the Western prairies, in a big box of a house, and had gone to bed in a room that was about the temperature of the snow-drifted yard. I could see him madly flinging off a few outer garments, making a spring into a bed that was like a frozen pond, lying there in a bunch, getting tolerably warm at last, but all night long fearful of moving an inch because of his frigid boundaries. As for the matter of wood, well, I had carried that, too, cords of it, for a fireplace that had devoured it relentlessly and given nothing adequate in return. I recalled that in cold weather I had never known what it was to be warm on both sides at once, that I had scorched my face while my back was freezing, then turned, like a chicken on a spit, to bake the other side. Without doubt I had grown used to it, so used to it that it had never occurred to me that in cold weather any one really could be warm on both sides at once; also, perhaps, it had hardened me, still— [Pg 66]

Elizabeth's ideas were not poetic; they did not express art for art's sake; anybody could see that; but, after all, there would be days—January days—when a fireplace alone, however beautiful as an ornament, would not make enough impression on the family circle, and scarcely any at all on the up-stairs. Coming up rather quietly somewhat later, she found me sitting under the big maple, surreptitiously studying a range and furnace catalogue borrowed of Westbury. We decided on Acme Hummers and I gave the order to the postman next morning.

VI

Our last night in the barn was not like the others

We lived a full week in the wood-house and barn, a week that is chiefly memorable to me now because of the kindness of our neighbors.

I wonder if in every New England neighborhood new-comers are treated as we were. It was high garden season, and I think not a day passed, that at least one basket of sweet corn, beans, lettuce, and such noble things was not set at our doors. [Pg 67]

From all about they came, and how sweet and fresh they were! There had been no lack of showers that summer, and gardens were at their best. Nothing is so good as sweet corn, freshly picked and put in the pot. We had never really had enough of it before. Now we had to strain our appetites to keep up with the supply. And lima beans, and buttered beets, and cucumbers and crisp salads, and fresh cabbage slaw! Dear me! Why must any one have to stay in town where all those things are scarce, and costly, and days old, and wilted, when he can go to the country and have them fresh and abundant from the garden—of his neighbor?

Some of the offerings were really artistic, prettily arranged, and garnished with flowers. Old Nat of the whitewash came one evening with a huge round basket, in the center of which was a big yellow pumpkin, the first of his crop, and ranged about it ears of corn, big red tomatoes, and heads of lettuce, the whole like some wonderful great flower. But then Nat was always an artist at heart. [Pg 68]

Our last night in the barn was not like the others. We had become very comfortable there, for we had built our hay higher, and we had learned the art of resting in that processional fashion, while the big, airy place and the patter of the not infrequent rain had grown dear to us. But that last night was different. It rained, as usual, but it did something more. I had been asleep an indeterminable time when I was aroused by a crash of thunder that for a moment I thought had taken off the roof. In the glimmer of lightning that followed I realized that Elizabeth was awake—also the Pride, aged twelve.

It was the sort of storm to make one sit up on his elbow. Elizabeth sat up on hers, and declined to lie back even when assured that it would be easier for the lightning to hit her in that half-erect position. The Pride began asking persistently if the barn was going to be struck. The Joy, who was next me, suddenly grabbed my arm and clung like a burr, saying nothing. The Hope, secure in the knowledge of an upright life, aided by a perfect digestion, slept as one in a trance, while the fierce pounding grew more alarming as flash followed flash and the crashes came more promptly and forcibly on the heels of every flare. I don't think I was exactly afraid, but I could not altogether forget the [Pg 69]

tradition that lightning has a mania for striking barns and it was this that had occurred to Elizabeth. She said she had been reading of storms like this in Jamaica, and that invariably they had struck barns, though whether she meant Jamaica of southern waters or the pretty suburb on Long Island by that name I have not learned to this day.

There was no wind, but all at once, at the very height of things, when the flashes and the crashes came together and the very sky seemed about to explode, one of our wide barn doors swung slowly, silently open, as if moved by a spirit hand, and at the same instant there came a blaze and roar that fairly filled the barn. A moment later the great door silently closed; then once more opened to let in a blinding, deafening shot.

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I made about three leaps and grabbed it, and a second later had it hooked and was back, the lightning at my heels

I could tell by what Elizabeth said that the big door ought to be shut and securely fastened. I made about three leaps and grabbed it, and a second later had it hooked and was back, the lightning at my heels. Then the clouds must have upset, for there came a downpour that fairly drowned the world.

But the artillery was passing. Soon flash and roar came farther apart and modified by distance. Nothing was left at last but a soothing rumble and the whisper of the receding rain. We slept, and woke to find ourselves rich, in sunlight, blue sky, and overflowing rain-barrels. This made it washday for Elizabeth and the tribe, and presently all the lines were full. It was a glorious storm, but that afternoon we moved our sleeping-arrangements to the house. The painters had finished up-stairs, and there was no purpose in exposing ourselves to storms

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which for all we knew, came straight from Jamaica, where they had a mania for hitting barns.

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CHAPTER THREE

I

At the threshold of the past

wonder if you are anything like as anxious to get into our old attic as we were. That is not likely. To us it meant romance, even a kind of sorcery —a bodily transmigration into the magic past.

Now and then during those August days we would open the door below and look up, perhaps even climb the stair and peer around a little, possessed by the spell of it, deterred only by our immediate affairs and the heat.

Then at last came a day, a cool Sunday when it was raining softly, and the tribe were having a "perfectly *lovelly*" time in the barn, Elizabeth and I climbed the rickety stairway to the Land of the Long Ago. There could be no better time for it—the quiet rain overhead, no workmen, no likelihood of visitors. [Pg 73]

At the top of the stair we

hesitated and looked about with something of the feeling that I suppose the Egyptian explorer had when he looked into the furnished

tomb of Queen Thi. We were at the threshold of the past.

A small window at each end gave light in plenty. There was a good deal of dust, and there were some cobwebs in the corners, but these did not disturb us. Only, we were a little bewildered by the extent of our possessions. We hardly knew where to begin. [Pg 74]

At first we picked our way about rather aimlessly, pointing to this thing and that, our voices subdued. There were all the high-backed chairs —fourteen, we counted, with those already carried down. Most of them would need new rush bottoms and black paint, but otherwise they had withstood the generations. They were probably a part of the old house's original furnishing—these and at least one of the spinning-wheels, of which there were four, the large kind, used for spinning wool; also the reel for winding yarn. Then we noticed a low wooden cradle, darkened with age, its sides polished by the hands that had rocked it—that had come next, no doubt. We remarked that one of the spinning-wheels was considerably smaller than the others —a child's wheel. We thought it might have come later, when one of the early occupants of the cradle had been taught to do her stint. It made a small, plaintive noise when I turned it, and I could see a little old-fashioned girl in linsey-woolsey dress and home-made shoes and stockings, in front of the big fireplace down-stairs, turning and turning [Pg 75] to that droning cadence, through long winter afternoons. Those other wheels had come for other daughters, or daughters-in-law, and if there ever was a time when all four were going at once, the low, long room must have been a busy place.

From a nail in a rafter hung a rusty tin lantern, through the patterned holes of which a single candle had once sprinkled with light the progress of the farmer's evening chores. That, too, had belonged to the early time, and from a dim corner I drew another important piece of furniture of that day. At first this appeared to be a nest of wooden chopping-bowls, oblong as to shape and evidently fashioned by hand. Then remembering something that Westbury had told me, I recognized these bowls as trenchers, the kind used in New England when pioneer homes were rather short in the matter of tableware. The trencher stood in the middle of the table and contained the dinner—oftenest a boiled dinner, I suppose—and members of the family helped themselves from it—I hesitate to say with their fingers, but [Pg 76] evidence as to table cutlery in the pioneer home of that period is very scanty. And, after all, if they had no plates, what need of cutlery? Their good, active fingers and stout teeth were made before knives and forks, and they did not enjoy their dinner the less for having it in that intimate way. I confess a sneaking weakness myself for an informal chicken bone or spare-rib—for most anything of the sort, in fact, that I can get a fairly firm hold of. It is better, of course, to have a handle to one's gravy, and sometimes, when the family is looking the other way, I can manage a swipe with a slice of bread, and so get a brief golden sample of the joys of my ancestors. The two smaller trenchers must have been used when company came—one for the bread, possibly; the other for pudding. I hope it was good, firm pudding, so that it could be managed without waste.

We found the kettle that they made the boiled dinner in, an enormous three-legged witch-pot, also a number of big iron crane hangers, for swinging vessels above the open fire. And there were three gridirons of different patterns, for grilling meat over the coals—one of them round with a revolving top, another square, sloping, with a little trough at the bottom to catch the juice of a broiling steak. Elizabeth agreed that we might use those sometimes and I set them over by the stair. We were not delving deeply, not by any means—just picking off the nuggets, as it were. It would be weeks before we would know the full extent of our collection.

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Pushed back under the eaves there were what appeared to be several "cord" bedsteads, not the high-posted kind—that would have been too much to expect—but the low, home-made maple bedsteads such as one often sees to-day in New England, shortened up into garden seats. There were, in fact, seven of them, as we discovered later. They would be of the early period, too, and probably had not been used for a good hundred years.

But it was the item we discovered next that would take rank, I think, in the matter of age. At the moment we did not understand it at all. It was a section of a hickory-tree, about fifteen inches through and two feet high, hollowed out at the top to a depth of nearly a foot. It was smooth inside and looked as if something had been pounded in it, as in a mortar. Presently we came upon a long, heavy hickory mallet, tapering at one end, smoothly rounded at the other. It had a short handle, and we thought it might have been a sort of pestle for the big mortar. But what had those old people ground in it?

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Westbury told us later; it had been their mill. By a slow, patient process they had macerated their corn in it until it was fine enough for bread.

The old hand-mill would undoubtedly take priority in the matter of antiquity. Those early settlers could do without beds and chairs and trenchers and cradles, even without spinning-wheels for a time, but they must very quickly have bread—corn, and a place to grind it. I think the old mill was older than the house. I think it came almost with the earliest camp-fire.

The articles thus far mentioned were all in one end of the attic. We were by no means through when we turned to the other end, the space beyond the great chimney. Here under the eaves were piles of yellow periodicals—religious papers, the New York *Tribune*, and those weekly story-papers whose thrilling "romances of real life," like "Parted at the Altar" and "The Lost Heir of Earlecliffe," were so popular with those young ladies of slender waists and sloping shoulders who became our grandmothers. I think none of the numbers dated farther back than the early forties of the last century, and they were not very inviting, for they were dusty and discolored and the mice had gnawed holes in the career of Lord Reginald and the sorrows of Lady Maude.

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But there were better things than these—jugs, jars, and bottles of marvelous patterns, and a stone churn, and some pewter and luster teapots, damaged somewhat, it is true, but good for mantel decoration over our fireplaces, and there were some queer old bandboxes, ornamented with flowers and landscapes, and finally two small wooden chests and a fascinating box of odds and ends, metal things, for the most part. [Pg 80]

We looked into the bandboxes. Some of them were empty, but in others were odds and ends of finery and quaint examples of millinery, the turban and poke and calash of vanished generations, some of them clearly copied after the model worn by Lady Maude at the very moment when at the church door she turned haughtily from Lord Crewston forever. We drew the chests to the light and took out garments of several sorts and of a variety of fashions. There were dresses of calico and delaine of the Civil War days, a curious cape which we thought had been called a "circular," a pretty silk apron with a bib, once precious to some young girl. Some of the waists were very slim, closely following the outlines of Lady Maude. Others were different—oh, very much so. I think these were of an earlier period, for among other things there were a number of garments made of stout, hand-woven linen, embroidered with initials which had not belonged to the house for nearly a century. I hope they were not a part of a bridal outfit, for no bride, no really popular bride, ought to be as ample as must have been the owner of those ch—garments, I mean. One of them, opened out, would be quite wide enough for a sheet, Elizabeth said, though somewhat lacking in length. She thought they would do for single beds, turned the other way. There were sturdy women in those days. [Pg 81]

In the bottom of the chest there was a pair of red and very pointed dancing-slippers. I don't think they belonged to the same person. Neither did they belong to the period of Lady Maude, being much older. They were very small and slim, and daintily made. Where had such pretty feet found floors on which to dance?

We laid them back with the other things where they had been put such a long time ago, and turned to the box of odds and ends. There were knobs and latches and keys—all of the old pattern—a hand-made padlock, some flat wrought hinges and some hand-wrought nails, left, perhaps, after the house was built. We sat flat on the floor to paw over these curious things, and the dull light, and the rain just overhead, certainly detracted nothing from our illusions. Every little piece in that box seemed to us a treasure. The old hinges would go on our new closet doors, held by the hand-made nails. The padlock was for the outside cellar door. The knobs would replace certain reproductions on some of our antique furniture. We knew what such things cost at the shops and how hard they were to find. And just then Elizabeth came upon a plated-silver buckle, and then upon another—a pair of them—old shoe or garter buckles, we could not be sure which. Why, our attic was a regular treasure island! [Pg 82]

We

picked out a number of things that seemed of special interest, including an iron crane we had found, and carried them down-stairs. The crane fitted the fireplace in the smaller room, which was to become our kitchen. We hung it and kindled a fire—our first real fire, for it was our first cool day. There was litter on the floor, but we did not mind it. We looked into the cheerful blaze, handled over the trifles we had found, and in quiet voices spoke of the past. During our two hours or so in the old attic we had been in step with the generations. We had broken bread at the camp-fire of the pioneer; we had seen him build his house and provide it with the simple, durable furnishings of his day; we had shared the easy comfort of his hearty board; we had drawn near to his good wife as she rocked the cradle or sat spinning in the firelight; we had watched their descendants attain prosperity and a taste for finery; we had seen how they had acquired fashion and in time had patterned their gowns, their bonnets, perhaps even their romances upon models of Lady Maude. They were all gone now, leaving us to carry on the story. We also would go our way; others would follow us, and they, too, would pass. It was a moment to look into the fire and think long, long thoughts.

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II

Paper-hanging is not a natural gift

One day I measured up our walls, and the next I went to town and bought the paper that was to cover them. I think it generally pays to do that, provided you can get somebody to hang it. There is a very pretty margin in wall-paper, and when you get a good deal of it that margin gnaws into one's substance. Shopping around the department stores, picking up remnant bargains, is the thing. I ran onto a lot of bedroom paper of a quaint chintzy pattern at four cents a roll, or about one-fifth what it would have cost in the regular way. I took enough of it for all the upper rooms, with some to spare, and was sorry there were not more rooms, so I could take it all. Then I found a gorgeous remnant of the glazed-tile variety for the kitchen, and still another for our prospective bath-room. A dull-green cartridge-paper for our living-room, "best" room, and my tiny study behind the chimney cost me eighteen cents a roll. The total bill was sixteen fifty-nine, and I got at least twice the pleasure out of the size of that bill that I would have had in earning double the sum in the time I spent. Figure out the profit in that transaction if you can. Whatever it was, it was satisfactory, and indeed few things in life are sweeter than the practice of our pet and petty economies. We all have them. I once knew a very rich man who would light a match and race from one gas-jet to another until he burnt his fingers, lighting as many as he could before striking a second match. He would generally say something when his fingers began to smoke, but to have lighted all the jets at both ends of his long room was a triumph that made this brief inconvenience of small account. I have also seen him spend more time, and even money, utilizing some worn-out appliance than a new one would cost. He was not a stingy man, either, not by any means, but those things were ingrained and vital. They helped to provide his life with interest and satisfaction—hence, were worth while.

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To go back to the papering: I bought some tools—that is to say, a paste-brush, and a smoothing-down brush, and a long pair of scissors, for I had a suspicion that my painters would be at their fall farming presently, in which case Westbury, who I was satisfied could do anything, had agreed to beautify our walls.

As a matter of fact, I hung most of that sixteen dollars and fifty-nine cents' worth of paper myself. When I got back, my painters were about to begin cutting their corn. Westbury came, but at the end of the first day, when one of the up-stairs rooms was about finished, he also developed a violent interest in corn-cutting. I was thus abandoned to fate, also quite deserted. My carpenters were cutting corn; Luther Merrill, my handsome plowman, was cutting corn; Old Pop and Sam were cutting corn; while Elizabeth had gone to the apartment in town to begin preparations for moving, and to put the Pride and the Hope into school. I was alone—alone with sixteen dollars' worth of paper, a big, flat paste-brush, and my bare, bare walls.

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Meantime I had trimmed some of the strips for Westbury and had given some slight attention to his artistic method. It looked rather easy, and there was still half a pail of paste. In some things I am impulsive, even daring. With a steady hand, I measured, cut off, and trimmed a strip of the pretty chintzy paper, laid it face down on the papering-board which Westbury had made, slapped on the paste with a free and business-like dash, folded up the end just as Westbury did, picked it up with an easy, professional swing, and started for the wall.

Being a tall man, I did not need the step-ladder. In those low rooms I could quite easily stand on the floor and paper from the ceiling down. Certainly that was an advantage. I discovered, however, that a step-ladder is not all of a paper-hanger's gifts. When I matched that piece of paper at the ceiling and started down with it, I realized presently that it was not going in the direction of the floor. At least not directly. It was slanting off at a bias to the southeast, leaving a long, lean, wedge-shaped gap between it and the last strip. I pulled it off and started again, shifting the angle. But I overdid the thing. This time it went biasing off in the other direction and left an untidy smudge of paste on Westbury's nice, clean strip. I reflected that this would probably dry out—if not, I would hang a picture over it. Then I gave the strip I was hanging a little twitch, being a trifle annoyed, perhaps, by this time, and was pained to see that an irregular patch of it remained on the wall, while the rest of it fell sloppily into my hands. It appeared that wall-paper became tender with damp paste on it and should not be jerked about in that nervous way. In seeking to remove the ragged piece from the plaster, holding up the mutilated strip meanwhile, something else occurred, I don't quite know what, but I suddenly felt a damp and gluey mess on my face, and then it was around my neck, and then I discovered that a portion of it had in some way got tangled up with my legs, upon which I think I became rather positive, for I seem to have wadded up several gooey balls of chintzy decoration and hurled them through the open window, far out upon the sun-flecked yard.

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I went below and washed up, and for a time sat under the maple shade and smoked. When more calm I said: "This is nothing—it is only a first lesson. Paper-hanging requires probationary study and experiment. It is not a natural gift, an extempore thing like authorship and song. I have paper enough to afford another lesson. This time I shall consider deeply and use great care."

I went back and prepared another strip, humbly and without any attempt at style. This time, too, I did not consider the line of the ceiling, but conformed to the vertical edge of Westbury's final strip, allowing my loose section to dangle like a plumb-line several moments before permitting it to get its death-grip on the wall. I will not say that this second attempt was an entire success, but it was a step in that direction. With a little smudging, a slight wrinkle or two, and a small torn place, it would do, and I was really quite pleased with myself when I observed it from across the room and imagined a kindly bureau just about in that spot. [Pg 90]

I hung another strip, and another. Some went on very well, some with heavy travail, and with results that made me grateful for our pictures and furniture. Yet it became fascinating work; it was like piecing out some vast picture-puzzle, one that might be of some use when finished. I improved, too. I was several days finishing the up-stairs, and by the time I got it done I had got back some of the dash I started off with. I could slap on the paste and swing the strip to the wall so handily that I was sorry Elizabeth was not there to observe me.

I went below and papered the kitchen. There were a lot of little shelves and cubby-nooks there, but they were only a new and pleasant variation to the picture-puzzle. I did the small room off the kitchen, including the ceiling, which was a new departure and at first discouraging. I was earning probably as much as a dollar and a half a day and I was acquiring at least that much in vanity and satisfaction, besides learning a new trade which might come handy in a day of need. I had some thought of proposing to Westbury a partnership in general paper-hanging and farming, with possibly an annex of antiques. [Pg 91]

III

There is nothing I wouldn't do for a bee—a reasonable bee

Matters did not go so well in the living-room. It was not because the old walls were more irregular there than elsewhere—I could negotiate that—it was those pesky bees. Reshingling the sides of the house had closed their outlets, and they had now found a crevice somewhere around the big chimney and were pouring in and out, whizzing and buzzing around the room by the hundred, clinging to the windows in droves, a maddening distraction on a hot afternoon to a [Pg 92] man with his head tipped back, in the act of laying a long, flimsy strip of wall-paper on a wavy, billowy old ceiling. They were no longer vicious and dangerous—they were only disorganized and panic-stricken. A hundred times a day I swept quantities of them from the windows and released them to the open air. It was no use to shut the doors, for there still were pecks of them between the floor and ceiling, and these came pouring out steadily, while those that I had dismissed hurried back again as soon as they could get their breath. I began to think we had met disaster in this unexpected quarter—that those persistent little colonists were going to dispossess us altogether.

Old Nat and I had tried smoking them with sulphur, which had quieted them temporarily while the men were shingling, but it had in no way discouraged them. In fact, I think there is nothing that will discourage a bee but sudden death, and that seems a pity, for in his proper sphere he is one of our most useful citizens. [Pg 93]

He is so wise, so wonderfully skilled and patient. I have read Maeterlinck's life of him, and there is nothing I would t do for a bee—a reasonable bee—one that would appreciate a little sound advice. That's just the trouble—a bee isn't built that way. He is so smart and capable, and such a wonder in most things, that he won't discuss any matter quietly and see where he is wrong and go his way in peace. Those bees thought that, just because they had found a hole in the outside of an old house, it was their house, and if anybody had to move it wouldn't be they. I explained the situation over and over and begged them to go away while the weather was still warm and the going good, but they just whizzed and raged around the rooms and sickened me with their noise and obstinacy.

When Elizabeth and the Joy came up, school matters being arranged, we decided, among other things, to evict those bees. There was just one way to do it, Westbury said, which was to saw through the floor up-stairs and take them out. He thought there would be some honey. We did not count much on that; what we wanted was to be rid of the [Pg 94] pests forever. I sent word to our carpenter, and Henry Jones came one morning with his saws.

In a corner of the upper room where we had heard a great buzzing he

bored a hole through the flinty oak floors. I had the smoker ready and pumped the sulphur fumes in pretty freely. Then he began to saw. He had gone only a little way when he said:

"My saw is running in honey."

Sure enough, it was coated with the clear sticky substance, which certainly did not make it run any easier. By hard work he managed to cut across two of the wide boards, and through them again, adjoining the next joist. When he was ready to lift out I pumped a new supply of smoke into the holes, then rather gingerly we pried up the pieces.

What a sight it was! Covered by a myriad of stupefied bees was layer upon layer of pure honey, the frightened insects plunging into the cells, filling themselves with their own merchandise, as is their habit when alarmed. Lazarus, a small colored assistant whom we had recently acquired, peered in cautiously (the sulphur fumes being still suggestive, with a good many bees flying), and I sent him for something to put the honey in—something large, I said—a dishpan.

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But Elizabeth had no great faith in our bee investigations, or she may have been inclined to discount Lazarus. She sent a porcelain dish, which I filled with a few choice pieces.

"Tell her this is just a sample, and to send the dishpan."

But still she thought either I or Lazarus was excited, and sent only an agate stew-pan, which I also filled.

"Take it down, Lazarus, and tell her that we still need the dishpan."

So then at last it came up, and we filled that, too.

We were not through, however. There was a heavy buzzing near the center of the room, and again we bored and smoked and sawed, and presently uncovered another swarm, with another surplus stock, this time a wash-boiler full, most of it fine and white, though some of the pieces were discolored, showing age. Elizabeth left her occupations and came up to investigate. Our old house had proven a regular honey-mine. We had enough for an indefinite period, and some for the neighbors. I suppose if we had left an outside hole for those bees they would have gone on multiplying and eventually would have packed our floors and walls solid full of honey, and we should have had, in truth, "the very sweetest house in all the world."

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I confess we felt sorry for those poor bees. A quantity of them refused to leave the premises and persisted on squeezing into the house if a door or window was left open. A clot of them formed on an old fence-post—around their queen, perhaps—and would not go away, though they knew quite well we had hardened our hearts against them and would not relent. If I had it to do over again I would bring down an old hive made from a hollow log, which we found up in the attic, and put into it some honey and some comb and invite them to set up business again in a small way. But my wounds were too fresh. They had daubed some of my new paper, driven me nearly frantic with their

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commotion, and stung me in several localities. The old fence-post was quite loose. In the evening I softly lifted it out, carried it to a remote place, and left it, just as any other heartless person would drop an unwelcome kitten. When I passed that way the following spring they were gone.

A last word about our papering. To this day I am proud of the job and don't wish to dismiss it in any casual way. I left our square "best" room till the last; it made a dramatic ending.

I believe I have not mentioned before that I washed down the old plaster with a solution of vinegar (a remnant from one of Uncle Joe's barrels) in order to kill the lime, which, Westbury said, was bad for the sticking qualities of the paste. Perhaps I made my solution a bit too strong for the "best"-room walls, or it may be that the plaster there was different—I don t know. I know that I worked till nearly midnight to [Pg 98] get done, Elizabeth holding a pair of lamps, and that when we came down next morning to admire our beautiful green walls by daylight, they were no longer green—at least, not solidly so, not definitely so. What seemed to us at first a sorrowful mottled complaint in yellow had every-where broken through, and I had the sickening feeling that my work was wasted and must be done over. But presently Elizabeth said, reflectively:

"It isn't so bad just as it is."

And I said, "Why, no! it's a kind of a pattern."

And then we both said, "Why, it's really artistic and beautiful."

And so it was. Over the dull green a large, irregular lacework of dull yellow had spread itself, and the more we looked the better we liked it. Just why the chemical affinity between plaster and paper should produce that particular effect we could not imagine, but there it was and there it stayed, for the process did not go any farther. Later on, when our furniture and pictures were in place, visitors used to say, [Pg 99] "*Wherever* did you get that wonderful paper?" If they were true friends and worthy, we told them. Otherwise we would vaguely hint of a special pattern, and that there was no more to be had of the kind.

IV

There was a place we sometimes visited to see the trout

I suppose about the most beautiful thing in life is novelty. In it is the chief charm of youth and travel and honeymoons. I will not say it is the most valuable thing there is, and it is likely to be about the most transient. But while it lasts it is precious, and inspiring beyond words.

No other autumn could ever be quite like that first one of our new possession, none could ever have the halo and the bloom of novelty that made us revel in all the things we could do and moved us to undertake them all. Days to come would be more peaceful and abundantly satisfying, happier, even, in the fullness of accomplishment, but never again would we know quite the thrill that each day brought during our first golden September at Brook Ridge. [Pg 100]

To begin with, it was September, and golden. The rains of August had ceased and their lavish abundance had filled brook and river and left the world a garden of wild aster and goldenrod, with red apples swinging from the trees, massed umbels of dark elderberries, and pink and purple grapes ripening in the sun. Our satisfaction with everything was unbounded. A New England farm, with its brook and springs and gray walls and odd corners, seemed to us, of all possessions, the most desirable. We took long walks through our quiet woods where there were hickory and chestnut trees, and oaks and hemlocks, and slender white birches that were like beautiful spirits, and tall maples, and even apple-trees, wild seedlings, planted by the birds, but thrifty and bearing. We had never seen that in the West. The fruit was not very tender, but well flavored and made delicious sauce. [Pg 101]

"Why, it must be the Garden of Eden," we said, "if the apple-tree grows wild!"

We carried baskets and gathered in infinite variety. Apples, hickory-nuts, berries, mushrooms—especially mushrooms, for we were fond of them and had carefully acquainted ourselves with the deadly kinds. Those, by the way, are all that one needs to know. All the others may be eaten. Some of them may taste like gall and wormwood, or living and enduring fire, and an occasional specimen may make the experimenter feel briefly unwell, but if he will acquaint himself with the virulent amanita varieties, and shun them, he will not die—not from poison. I do not guarantee against indigestion.

We would bring home as many as seventeen sorts of those edible toadstools, beautiful things in creamy white, brown, purple, yellow, coral, and vivid scarlet, and get out our *Book of a Thousand Kinds*, and patiently identify them, tasting for the flavor and sometimes getting a hot one or a bitter one, but often putting as many as a dozen kinds into the chafing-dish. Even if the result was occasionally a bit [Pg 102]

"woodsy" as to savor, we did not mind much, not in those days of novelty, though Elizabeth did once think she felt a "little dizzy" after an unusually large collection, and I had a qualm or two myself. But when we looked up and found that mushroom poison does not begin to destroy for several hours, we fell to discussing other matters, and did not remember our slight inconvenience until long after we should have been dead, by the book limitation.

There was a gap in the stone wall where we passed from our land into Westbury's, and beyond it an open place that was a mushroom-garden. Green and purple russulas grew there as if they had been planted, beds of coral-hued "Tom Thumbs" that were like strawberries, and a big, bitter variety of boletus, worthless but beautiful, having the size and appearance of a pie—a meringue pie, well browned. A path led to another garden where in a hidden nook we one day discovered a quantity of chanterelles that were like wonderful black morning-glories. It was duskily shaded there, and through the flickering green we noticed a vivid, red spot that was like a flame. We pushed out to it and came upon a tiny, silent brook slipping through a bed of cowslip and water-arum, and at its margin a scarlet cardinal-flower, burning a star upon the afternoon.

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There was a place which we sometimes visited to see the trout. You crossed the bean-lot and came to a little secluded land where there were slim cedars and grass and asters and goldenrod, a spot so still and unvisited that it was like a valley that one might find in a dream. Our brook flowed through it and in one place there was a quiet pool and an overhanging rock. Willows and alders sheltered it, and if you slipped through without noise and lay very still, you were pretty sure to see a school of trout, for it was their favorite haunt. Once we counted twenty-two there, lying head up-stream, gently fanning their tails and white-edged fins. They were a handsome lot, ranging in size from eight to twelve inches, and we would not have parted with them for the cost of the farm.

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The "precious ones" joined in some of these excursions, but our diversions

were too tame for them, as a rule. Wading, racing up and down, tumbling on the hay, with now and then a book in the shade, was more to their liking. When the two older ones had gone to school and the Joy was with us alone, she invented plays of her own, plays in which a capering horse—that is to say, herself—had the star part. Once I found her sitting by a tub of water, sailing a wonderful boat in it—one that she had made for herself, out of a chip and a nail, using a stone for a hammer. She wore one of the antique bonnets brought down from the attic, and seemed lost in contemplation of her handiwork. Without her noticing, I made a photograph. How it carries me back, to-day.

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I have mentioned our varied undertakings. When wild grapes ripened on the roadside walls—the big, fragrant wild grapes of New England—we made a real business of gathering them. They were in endless quantity, three colors—pink, purple, and white—and their rich odor betrayed them. Placing some stones in the brook one afternoon, I became conscious of a thick wave of that sweet perfume, and, looking up, discovered a natural trellis of clusters just above my head. I don't know how many bushels we gathered in all, or how many quarts of jelly and jam and sweet wine we made. I found in the attic, which we named our "Swiss Family Robinson," because it was provided with everything we needed, an old pair of "pressers," and squeezed out grape juice and elderberry juice and blackberry juice, while Elizabeth stirred and boiled and put away, for we were New England farmers now, and were going to do all the things, and have preserves and nuts and apples laid away for winter. How we worked—played, I mean, for with novelty one does not work, but becomes a child again, and plays. And the more toys we can find, and the longer we can make each one last, the happier and better and younger we shall be.

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CHAPTER FOUR

I

There is compensation even for moving

n the 1st of October we moved. Ah, me! How easily one may dismiss in words an epic thing like that. Yet it is better so. Moves, like earthquakes, are all a good deal alike, except as to size and the extent of destruction. Few care for the details. I still have an impression of two or three nightmarish days that began with some attempt at real packing and ended with a desperate dropping of anything into any convenient box or barrel or bureau drawer, and of a final fevered morning when two or more criminals in the guise of moving-men bumped and scraped our choicest pieces down tortuous stairways and slammed them into their cavernous vans, leaving on the pavement certain unsightly, disreputable articles for every passer-by to scorn.

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It is true that this time we had a box-car—we had never before risen to that dignity—and I recall a weird traveling to and fro with the vans, and intervals of anguish when I watched certain precious, and none too robust, examples of the antique fired almost bodily into its deeper recesses. Oh, well, never mind; it came to an end. Our goods arrived at the Brook Ridge station, and Westbury and his teams transported them—not to the house, but to the barn, for among other things in Brook Ridge we had unearthed an old cabinet-maker whom we had engaged for the season to put us in order before we set our possessions in place. He erected a bench in the barn, and there for a month he glued and scraped and polished and tacked, and as each piece was finished we brought it in and tried it in one place and another, discovering all over again how handsome it was, restored and polished, and now at last in its proper setting.

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There was compensation even for moving in getting settled in that progressive way, each evening marking a step toward completion. When our low book shelves were ranged in the spaces about the walls, the books wiped and put into them; when our comfortable chairs were drawn about the fireplaces; when our tall clock with a shepherdess painted on the dial had found its place between the windows and was ticking comfortably—we felt that our dream of that first day was coming true, and that the reality was going to be even

better than the dream. [Pg 110]

Sometimes at the end of the day, as I sat by the waning embers, and watched her moving to and fro between me and the fading autumn fields

Of course the old living-room was the best of all. Its length and low ceiling and the great fireplace would insure that. We had ranged a row of blue plates, with some of the ancient things from the attic, along the narrow mantel, and it somehow seemed as if they had been there from the beginning. The low double windows were opposite the fireplace. We had our large table there, and between meal-times the Joy liked to spread her toys on it. She wore her hair cut in the Dutch fashion, and sometimes at the end of the day, as I sat by the waning embers and watched her moving to and fro between me and the fading autumn fields, I had the most precious twilight illusion of having stepped backward at least a hundred years.

We thought our color scheme good, and I suppose there is really no better background for old mahogany than dull green. Golden brown is handsome with it, and certain shades of blue, but there is something about the green with antique furniture that seems literally to give it a soul. Never had our possessions shown to such an advantage (no pun intended, though they did shine) and never, we flattered ourselves, had the old house been more fittingly appointed. With the pictures and shades put up, the rugs put down, and the fires lit, it seemed to us just about perfect. It was a jewel, we thought, and to-day, remembering it, I think so still. [Pg 111]

II

There is work about making apple-butter

Perhaps I am making it all sound too easy and comfortable. The past has a way of submerging its sorrows. With a little effort, however, I can still recall some of them. Our transition period was not all picnic and poetry. There were days of stress—hard, nerve-racking days when it seemed that never in the wide world would things get into shape—as when, for instance, the new kitchen range arrived and would not go through any of the kitchen doors; when our grandfather clock had been found an inch too tall for any of our rooms; when our [Pg 112] big fireplace had poured out smoke until we were blind and asphyxiated. Any one of these things would be irritating, and coming together, as they did, one gloomy, chilly morning, they had presented an aspect almost of failure. Then, being resolute and in good health, we proceeded to correct matters. We stripped the range for action, took out a sash, and brought it in edgewise through a window. We mortised down an inch into the flinty oak floor and let in the legs of the old clock so that its top ornament would just clear the ceiling.

The fireplace problem was more serious. We knew that the chimney was big enough, for we could look up it at a three-foot square of sky, and our earlier fires had given us no trouble. We solved the mystery when we threw open an outside door to let out the smoke. The smoke did not go out; it rushed back to the big fireplace and went up the chimney, where it belonged. We understood, then—in the old days air had poured in through a hundred cracks and crevices. Now we had tightened our walls and windows until the big chimney could no longer [Pg 113] get its breath. It must have a vent, an air-supply which must come from the outside, yet not through the room.

Here was a chance for invention. I went down cellar to reflect and investigate. I decided that a stove-pipe could be carried from a small cellar window to the old chimney base, and by prying up the thick stone hearth we could excavate beneath it a passage which would admit the pipe to one end of the fireplace, where it could be covered and made sightly by a register. Old Pop came with his crowbar and pick, and Westbury brought the galvanized pipe and the grating. It was quite a strenuous job while it lasted, but it was the salvation of our big fireplace, and I was so proud of the result that I did not greatly mind the mashed foot I got through Old Pop's allowing the thousand-pound stone hearth to rest on it while he attended to another matter.

I have given the details of this non-smoke device because any one buying and repairing an old house is likely to be smoked out and might not immediately stumble upon the simple remedy. I know when [Pg 114] later, at the club, I explained it to an architectural friend, he confessed that the notion had not occurred to him, adding, with some shame, that he had more than once left a considerable crack under a door as an air-supply. Imagine!

So these troubles passed, and others in kind and variety. Those were busy days. We were doing so many things, we hardly had time to enjoy the fall scenery, the second stage of it, as it were, when the goldenrod and queen's-lace-handkerchief were gone, the blue wild asters fading, and leaves beginning to fall, though the hilltops were still ablaze with crimson and gold. Once we stole an afternoon and climbed a ridge that looked across a valley to other ridges swept by the flame of autumn. It was really our first wide vision of the gorgeous fall colorings of New England, and they are not surpassed, I think, anywhere this side of heaven.

We gathered our apples. We had a small orchard of red Baldwins across the brook, and some old, scattering trees such as you will find on every New England farm. These last were very ancient, and of varieties unknown to-day. One, badly broken by the wind, we cut, and its rings gave it one hundred and fifty years. Putnam's soldiers could have hooked apples from that tree, and probably did so, for it was not in plain view of the house.

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We put the Baldwins away and made cider of the others, it being now the right moment, when there was a tang of frost in the morning air. We picked up enough to fill both of Uncle Joe's cider-barrels, Westbury and I hauled them to the mill, and the next day Elizabeth was boiling down the sweet juice into apple-butter, which is one of the best things in the world.

There is work about making apple-butter. It is not just a simple matter of putting on some juice and letting it boil. Apples must go into it, too, a great many of them, and those apples must be peeled and sliced, and stirred and stirred eternally. And then you will find that you need more apples, more peeling and slicing, and more stirring and stirring, oh yes, indeed. Elizabeth stirred, I stirred, and Lazarus, our small colored vassal, stirred. I said if I had time I would invent an apple-butter machine, and Elizabeth declared she would never undertake such a job again, never in the world! But that was mere momentary rebellion. When it was all spiced and done and some of it spread on slices of fresh bread and butter, discontent and weariness passed, and next day she and Lazarus were making pickles and catsup and apple jelly, while Old Pop and I were hauling all the flat stones we could find and paving the wide space between the house and the stone curb which already we had built around the well. Oh, there is plenty to do when one has bought an old farm and wants to have all the good things, and the livable things; and October is the time to do them, when the mornings are brisk, and the days are balmy, and evening brings solace by the open fire.

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III

Lazarus's downfall was a matter of pigs

It was Lazarus, I think, who most enjoyed the open fire. Stretched full length on the hearth, flat on his stomach, his chin in his hands, baking himself, he might have been one of his own ancestors of the African forest, for he was desperately black, and true to type. A runty little spindle-legged darky of thirteen, Lazarus had come to us second-hand, so to speak, from the county home. A family in the neighborhood was breaking up, and Lazarus's temporary adoption in the household was at an end. He had come on an errand one evening, and our interview then had led to his being transferred to our account. [Pg 117]

"I goin' away nex' week," he said.

"Where are you going, Lazarus?"

"Back to de home, where I come from."

"What do you get for your work where you are now?"

"Boa'd and clo's an' whatever dey min' to give."

"What do you do?"

"Bring wood, wash dishes, and whatever dey wants me to."

"How would you like to come up here for a while?"

He had his eye on my target-rifle as he replied, "Yassah, I'd like it—what sort o' gun yo' got?" [Pg 118]

I explained my firearm to him and let him handle it. His willingness to come grew.

"Are you a pretty good boy, Lazarus?"

"Oh, yassah—is—is yo' goin' to le' me shoot yo' gun ef I come?"

"Very likely, but never mind that now. What happens if you're not good?"

He eyed me rather furtively. "De rule is yo cain't whip," he said. "You kin only send back to de home."

We agreed on these terms, and Lazarus arrived the day after the auction that closed out his former employers. As an aside I may mention that Old Pop laid off a day to attend the said auction, and bought a pink chenille portière and a Japanese screen.

I want to be fair to Lazarus, and I confess, before going farther, that I think we did not rate him at his worth. He had artistic value—he was good literary material. I feel certain of that now, and I think I vaguely realized it at the time. But I was not at the moment doing anything in [Pg 119]

color, and for other purposes he was not convincing. His dish-washing was far from brilliant and his sweeping was a mess. Also, his appetite for bringing wood had grown dull. There is an old saying which closely associates a colored person with a wood-pile, but our particular Senegambian was not of that variety. The only time he really cared for wood was when it was blazing in the big fireplace, and the picture he made in front of it was about all that we thought valuable. It is true that he made a good audience and would accompany me to the fuel-heap and openly admire and praise my strength in handling the big logs, but his own gifts lay elsewhere. He approved of my gun and would have spent whole days firing it into the sky or the tree-tops, or at the barn or at birds, or into an expansive random, to the general danger of the neighborhood, if I had let him. He had a taste for jewelry, especially for my scarf-pins. When he saw one loosely lying about he carefully laid it away to prevent accident, using a very private little box he had, as a proper and safe place for it. When he discussed this matter he told me quite casually that he spected something *would* happen to him some day, as his father and uncle, and I think he said his grandfather, were at the moment in the penitentiary. He was inclined to exaggerate and may have been boasting, but I think his ancestry was of that turn.

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Lazarus's own chief treasure was a clock. I do not recall now where he said it came from, but he valued it highly. It was a round tin clock, with an alarm attachment. He kept it by his bed, and the alarm was his especial joy. He loved the sound of it, I do not know why. Perhaps it echoed some shrill, raucous cry of the jungle that had stirred his ancestors, and something hereditary in him still answered to it. He never seemed to realize that it was attached to the clock for any special purpose, such as rousing him to the affairs of the day. To him it was music, inspiration, even solace. When its strident concatenation of sounds smote the morning air Lazarus would let it rave on interminably, probably hugging himself with the fierce joy of it, lulled by its final notes to a relapse of dreams. It did not on any occasion stimulate him to rise and dress. That was a more strenuous matter—one requiring at times physical encouragement on my part. Had his bulk been in proportion to his trance, I should have needed a block and tackle and a derrick to raise this later Lazarus.

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Lazarus's downfall was a matter of pigs. We did not expect to embark in pig culture when we settled at Brook Ridge, but Westbury encouraged the notion, and our faith in Westbury was strong. He said that pigs had a passion for dish-water and garbage, and that our kitchen surplus, modestly supplemented with "shorts," would maintain a side-line of two pigs, which would grow into three-hundred-pounders and fill up Uncle Joe's pork and ham barrels by the end of another season.

The idea was alluring. A neighbor had small pigs for sale, and I ordered a pair. There was an old pen near the barn, and I spent a day setting it in order for our guests. I repaired the outlets, swept it, and put in nice clean hay. I built a yard easy of access from the pen, and installed a generous and even handsome trough. Westbury said our

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preparations were quite complete. I could see that our pigs also approved of it. They capered about, oof-oofing, and enjoyed their trough and contents. True, their manners left something to be desired, but that is often the case with the young.

What round, cunning, funny little things they were! We named them Hans and Gretel, and were tempted to take them into the house, as pets. We might have done so, only that I remembered the story of the Arab who invited his camel to put his head in the tent. I had a dim suspicion that those two pigs would own the house presently, and that we should have no place to go but the pen. Lazarus was fascinated by them. He hung over the side of their private grounds and wanted to carry them refreshments constantly.

"Dem cert'ney make mighty fine shotes by spring," he announced to everybody that came along, "an' by killin'-time dey grow as big as dat barn. I gwine to feed 'em all day an' see how fat dey gits." [Pg 123]

"You're elected, Lazarus," I said. "It's your job. You look after Hans and Gretel and we'll look after you."

"Yo' des watch 'em grow," said Lazarus.

For a while we did. We went out nearly every day to look at our prospective ham and bacon supply, and it did seem to be coming along. Then I had some special work which took me away for a fortnight, and concurrently a bad spell of weather set in. Elizabeth, occupied with the hundred supplementary details of getting established, and general domestic duties, could not give Hans and Gretel close personal attention, and they fell as a monopoly to Lazarus. With his passion for pigs, she thought he might overfeed them, but as she had never heard of any fatalities in that direction he was not restrained. [Pg 124]

But it may be this idea somehow got hold of Lazarus. I came home one evening and asked about the pigs. Elizabeth was doubtful. She had been out that day to look at them and was not encouraged by their appearance. She thought they had grown somewhat—in length. When I inspected them next morning, I thought so, too. I said that Hans and Gretel were no longer pigs they were turning into ant-eaters. Their bodies appeared to have doubled in length and halved in bulk. Their pudgy noses had become beaks. I was reminded of certain wild, low-bred pigs which I had seen splitting the hazel-brush of the West, the kind that Bill Nye once pictured as outrunning the fast mail. I said I feared our kitchen by-product was not rich enough for Hans and Gretel. Possibly that was true. Still, it would, have been better than nothing, which it appeared was chiefly what those poor [Pg 125]

porkers had been living on.

Lazarus's love had waned and died. On chilly, stormy evenings it had been easier to fling the contents of his pail and pan out back of the wood-house than to carry them several times farther to the pen, while the supplementary "shorts" had been shortened unduly for Hans and Gretel. The physical evidence was all against Lazarus—the fascinations of the big open fire had won him; he had been untrue to the pigs. When he appeared, they charged him in chorus with his perfidy, and he could frame no adequate reply. Westbury came, and I persuaded him to take them at a reduction, and threw in Uncle Joe's pork and ham barrels. I said we wanted Hans and Gretel to have a good home—that we had not been worthy of them.

They found it at Westbury's. There they were in a sort of heaven. When I saw them at the end of another two weeks they were again unrecognizable—they were once more pigs. [Pg 126]

We parted, with Lazarus about the same time. Our régime was not suited to his needs. It was a pity. With his gifts, the right people might have modeled him into a politician, or something, but we couldn't. We had neither the equipment nor the time. Nor, according to agreement, could we administer that discipline which, from our old-fashioned point of view, he sometimes seemed to require. We could only "send back to de home." Perhaps to-day he is "somewhere in France," making a good soldier. I hope so.

IV

Westbury had advised against wheat

But if our venture in pig culture had not been an entire success, our agriculture gave better promise. Our rye and grass seed had come up abundantly, and by November the fields, viewed from a little distance, were a mass of vivid green. There is something approaching a thrill in seeing the seed of your own sowing actually break ground and spring up and wax strong with promise. You seem somehow to have had a hand in the ancient miracle of life. [Pg 127]

Our rye had such a sturdy look that I said it was pretty sure to turn out something fancy in the way of grain, and that we could probably sell it as "seed" rye, which always brought a better price than the regular crop. Then, as the idea expanded, I said that with our few acres we could cultivate intensively and raise seed crops entirely. That would be something really aristocratic in the farming line. We would begin with seed rye and wheat, of which latter grain I had put in a modest sowing. Next year we would go in for seed potatoes, oats, corn, and the like. We could have a neat sign on the stone wall in front, announcing our line of goods. Very likely buyers would come from a considerable distance for them—I had myself driven seven miles with Westbury for the seed rye. A business like that would grow. We could go in for new varieties of things, and in time set up a shipping-station, with a packing-house and a bookkeeper. No doubt Henderson and Hiram Sibley and Ferry and those other seed magnates had begun in some such modest way. [Pg 128]

I don't think Elizabeth responded entirely to this particular enthusiasm, and I could see that she was doubtful about the sign in front, but on a winy, windless November day, warmed by a mellow sun, all things seem possible, and she graciously admitted that one never could tell —that stranger things had happened. Then we came to our small wheat-field, and the new seed enthusiasm received a slight check. Westbury had advised against wheat. He said it did not do well in that section. This, I had insisted, must be a superstition, and I had gone to considerable expense to have the ground properly prepared, and to obtain the best seed.

The result, as it appeared now, was not promising. Here and there a spindling blade had come through, and some of those seemed about to turn into grass. I do not know why wheat acts like that in Connecticut. I did not follow up the scientific phases of the case, but I confided to Elizabeth that perhaps, after all, we would not announce "Seed Wheat" on the neat sign planned for the outer wall. [Pg 129]

Late October winds had changed the aspect of our world. Our woods were no longer deep, vast, and mysterious. We could see straight through them and read their most hidden secrets. We discovered one day, what we had never suspected, that at one place our brook turned and came back almost to the road. All that summer it had supped

silently through that brushy corner which for some reason we had never penetrated. We discovered, too, a little to one side of our former excursions, a rocky acclivity, a place of pretty hemlock-trees and seclusion—a spot for a summer tent.

There were not many mushrooms any more, but we gathered gay red berries for decoration, bunches of late fern, sprays of bittersweet; we raked over the leaves for nuts, and sometimes found bits of spicy wintergreen or checkerberry, the kind that always flavored old-fashioned lozenges which our grandmothers bought in little rolls for a penny, on the way to school. You may guess that this was pleasant play to us who for ten years had known only city or suburban life at this season, and not the least pleasant part of it was the quiet noise the leaves made as we strode through them, the *fruis-sas-se-ar*, as the French of the Provence call it, and the word as they speak it conveys the sound. Astride a stick horse, of which on our new back porch she kept a full stable, the Joy went racing this way and that, kicking high the loose brown drift of summer, stirred to a sort of ecstasy by its pleasant noise and the spicy autumn air.

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The November woods had fewer voices than those of the earlier season, but there was more visible life. Many of the birds remained, and they could no longer hide so easily. A hawk or an owl on a bare bough was sharply outlined. Rabbits darted among the trees, or stood erect, staring at us with questioning eyes. Squirrels scampering over the limbs gave exhibitions of acrobatic skill. There were two kinds of squirrels—the fat gray ones, of which there were not many, and the venomous little red ones, of which there seemed an overproduction. They were cute little wretches, but we did not care for them. They were pugnacious pirates; they robbed their unmilitant gray relative and chased him from the premises. Earlier in the season they had thrown down quantities of green nuts to be wasted, and we were told they robbed birds' nests, not only of their eggs, but of their young. Those red rovers had no food value, or they would have been fewer. They were a mere furry skin drawn over a bunch of wires and strings, and not worth a charge of powder.

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V

Deer—wild deer—on our own farm!

Animal life is still plentiful in New England—far more so than in the newer states of the Middle West. With the decrease of population in many districts the wild things have wandered back to their old haunts. They are not very persistently hunted, and some of them, like the deer, are protected. Now and again in our walks we saw a fox, wary and silent-footed, and often on sharp nights, on the hill above the house, one barked anxiously at the moon. At least that is the poetic form, though I really think he was barking for the same reason that I often sing when others of the family are not present. The others claim they do not care for it—I often wonder why. I suppose that fox's family was the same way, so he went out there alone in a dark, safe place to enjoy his music unrestrained. Yet no place seems entirely safe when one wants to sing, and I fear something happened to that fox, for by and by we did not hear him any more. Very likely one of his relatives crept up on him with a brick. We were sorry, for we had learned to like his music—it gave us a wild, primeval feeling.

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I think there were no wolves or bears in our immediate neighborhood, though there came reports of them, now and then—exaggerated, I dare say—from adjoining ridges. The nearest thing we had to bears were some very fat and friendly woodchucks, who at a little distance, sitting on their haunches, looked very much like small grizzlies. They dug their holes a few yards from the house and sometimes came quite to the back door, probably intending to call, but when we approached them their courage failed and they went "galumphing" back to their houses. There they would sit up for a moment, staring at us, then, if we approached suddenly, would dive to lower recesses. I explained to the Joy that they most likely had cozy little houses down there, with chairs and tables and a nice stove to cook their food things on. She was sure it was all true, except about the stove, which seemed doubtful, because no smoke ever came from their chimneys.

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Most of the animals were friendly to us, and I think made our house a sort of center. I remember one pleasant Sunday afternoon, when we were sitting outside, we noticed simultaneously two woodchucks playing in the field just across the road; a red squirrel pursuing a gray one along our stone wall, almost within arm's-reach; a blue heron among the willows by the brook, probably prospecting for trout; some bob-whites running along by the roadside; while in the woods just beyond a partridge was drumming up further recruits for the exhibition.

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The deer did not call as soon as the others. They were reserved and aristocratic and would seem to have looked us over a good while before they accepted us. We frequently saw their tracks, and hoped for one of the glimpses reported by our neighbors.

It came one morning, very early. A cow in an adjoining field was

making an unusual sound. Elizabeth looked out and beckoned me to the window. There they were, at last! two reddish-tan, shy creatures—a doe and a half-grown fawn—stepping mincingly down to the brook to drink. We could have hugged ourselves with the delight of it—deer—wild deer—on our own farm, drinking from our own brook, here in this old, old land!

I wonder if they heard us, or perhaps sensed us. Or they may not have liked the noise of greeting, or protest, made by the neighbor's cow. Whatever the reason, they suddenly threw up their heads, seemed to look straight at us, turned lightly, and simply floated away. What I mean by that is that their movement was not like that of any other animal, or like a bird's—it suggested thistledown. They drifted over the stone wall and clumps of bushes without haste and seemingly without weight. It was as if we had seen phantoms of the dawn.

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We saw them often, after that. Sometimes at evening they grazed in our lower meadow. Once, three of them in full daylight crossed the upland just above the house. They were not fifty yards away, moving deliberately, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

We felt the honor of it—they had admitted us to their charmed circle.

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CHAPTER FIVE

But Sarah was biding her time

have not mentioned, I think, a small building that, when we came, stood just across the road from our house—a rather long, low structure with sliding windows, called "the shop." Red raspberries of a large, sweet variety were ripening about it, and within was a short box counter, a shoemaker's work-bench, a cutting-board, a great bag of wooden shoe-pegs, and a quantity of leather scraps, for it had, in fact, been a shop during the two generations preceding our ownership. Before that it appeared to have served as a sort of office for Captain Ben Meeker, who also had been not merely a farmer, as certain records proved. Captain Ben may have built the shop, though I think it was older, for when we examined the picturesque little building, with a view to restoration, it proved to be too far gone—too much a structure of decay. So we tore down "the shop," and, incidentally, Old Pop, who did the tearing, found a Revolutionary bayonet in the loft; also a more recent, and particularly hot, hornets' nest which caused him to leap through the window and spring into the air several times on the way to the bushes by the brook. But that is another story. We have already had the bee history; hornets would be in the nature of a repetition.

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We found something of still greater interest in the old shop. One day, digging over the leather scraps, we uncovered the records above mentioned—that is to say, the old account-books of Captain Ben Meeker and the two generations of shoemakers who had followed him. These ancient folios, stoutly made and legibly written, correlate a good deal of Brook Ridge history for a hundred years. The names of the dead are there, and the items of their forgotten activities.

From Westbury and others we already knew that Benjamin Meeker and Sarah, his wife, had occupied our house at the beginning of the last century—young married folks then—and that there had been a little girl (owner of the small brass-nailed trunk, maybe) who in due time had grown up and married the young shoemaker, Eli Brayton, of "distant parts," he being from eastern New York, as much as fifty miles away. Brayton had remained in the family, set up his bench in

one end of the building across the road, and there for a generation made the boots of the countryside, followed in the trade by his son, the "Uncle Joe" who at eighty-five had laid down the hammer and the last a year prior to our coming. This was good history in outline, and Westbury had supplied episodes, here and there, embellished in his improving fashion. The old books came now as a supplement—an extension course, as it were, in the history of Captain Ben and his successors.

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While not recorded, we may assume that Captain Ben belonged to the militia, hence his title. That he had another official position we learn from certain items of entry:

To serving one summon on S. Davis 3 shillin
To serving one tachment on J. Fillow 2 shillin
To fees: execushun Eli Sherwood 2 shillin 6 pnc.

Evidently a constable or deputy sheriff, and I think we may assume that the last item records a process, and not a performance. The fees are reassuring. Eli could hardly have been dismissed mortally for two and six.

Captain Ben had still other activities. He owned teams for hire; he dealt in livestock; in addition to his farm he owned a sawmill on the brook; he even went out at day's labor—certainly a busy man, requiring carefully kept accounts, and an office.

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The accounts begin in 1797 and are sometimes kept in dollars and cents, sometimes in the English fashion, as above. Sometimes the charges are made in one form, the credits in another. It was just as he got started, I suppose, both moneys being in about equal circulation.

Captain Ben's spelling is interesting. He was by no means illiterate. His writing is trim, his accounts in good form and correctly figured. But it was more a fashion in that day to spell as pronounced, and his orthography gives us a personal sense of the period.

"To plowin garding ... 2 shillin." You can almost hear him say that, while "To haulin stun" likewise carries the fine old flavor.

We have heard much of the "good old times when things were cheap," but Captain Ben's book proves that not all commodities were cheap in his day. Calico, for instance, is set down at three and six a yard—that is, eighty-five cents. Handkerchiefs at two shillings thrippence each, sugar at a shilling per pound, which is more than double our war-time prices. It is not well to complain, even to-day, remembering those rates, especially when we note that in 1805 Captain Ben's labor brought him only four shillings a day (six with team), and his sawing, in small lots, but a trifle. Labor was, in fact, cheap at that period; also unfortunately for Captain Ben—rum and brandy.

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The book does not say where Ezekial Jackson kept his general store, but that was where Captain Ben dealt, and his items of purchase are

faithfully set down. A good many men "swear off" on the New Year, but Captain Ben didn't. He bought a "decantur," price two and six (ah me! it would be an antique, now), and promptly started in having it filled. Behold the startling credits to Ezekial Jackson during the first ten days of 1806:

Jan. 1, By 2 lb. sugar 2 shillin
" 1, " 1 qt. brandy 2 shillin
" 5, " 1 qt. brandy 2 shillin
" 6, " 1 qt. brandy 2 shillin
" 10, " 1 qt. brandy 2 shillin

But perhaps this was too costly a pace, for the next entry is, "Jan. 15, 1 jug, 1 shillin," and on the same date, "One gallon of rum, 6 shillin." That, you see, was somewhat cheaper and required fewer trips to town. On January 20th the jug was filled again, and on the same date we find set down "four and a half yards of chintz and one scane of silk." That chintz and "scane" of silk look suspicious—they look like tranquilizers for Sarah, his wife.

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Through that month and the three following the liquid items follow with alarming monotony, only separated here and there by entries of "tee" and sugar and certain yards of "cotting" and "scanes" of silk for Sarah.

But Sarah was biding her time. The book does not say that the minister was asked to call, or that he came. It does not need to. We may guess it from the next entry:

May 2, By 1 famly bible 1 poun, 13 shillin

That ended the rum chapter. There is not another spirituous entry in all of Ezekial Jackson's credits. "By one mometer" comes next, May 6th. Probably Captain Ben felt himself cooling down pretty rapidly for the season, and wanted to take the temperature. Then follows "two combs"—he was going to keep slicked up—also earthenware, indigo, "cotting," and more scanes of silk, mainly for Sarah, no doubt, and so on to the end, when the account is closed and underneath is written:

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This day made all even betwixt Ezekial Jackson and myself.

B. M.

Captain Ben's accounts close in 1829, but the shoemaking records had long since begun. They are more prosaic, but they have an interest, too. A book with charges against Joel Barlow and Aaron Burr could hardly fail of that, though the said Joel Barlow is not the poet-diplomat who wrote the "Columbiad" and shone in European courts, nor Aaron Burr the corrupter of Blennerhassett and the slayer of Alexander Hamilton. At least, I judge they were not, for this Barlow and this Burr had cobbling charges against them as late as 1840,

when the intriguing Aaron and the gifted Joel no longer needed earthly repairs. Nevertheless, they were of the same families, for Joel Barlow, the poet, was born just over the hill from us, and the name of Aaron Burr was known in Connecticut long before it found doubtful distinction in New Jersey.

The shoemaker's accounts reflect a life that is now all but gone. Some of the charges were offset with potatoes, some with rye, some with labor, a few of them with cash. A pair of boots in 1828 brought two dollars and fifty cents. Repairs ranged from six cents up, many of the charges being set down in half-cents. Those were exact, frugal days.

II

We often cooked by our fireplace

One hundred and fifty Thanksgivings must have preceded ours in the old house, but I think out of them all you could not have picked a better one. I would not like to say a more bountiful one, for I suppose in the earlier day they had great wild turkeys and perhaps a haunch of venison, braces of partridges and other royal fare. Even so, they could hardly have eaten it all, and I think their noble turkey did not taste any better than ours. Moreover, we were glad that our deer and partridges were still running free.

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We did not lack of native dishes. Our mince and pumpkin pies were home products, as well as our apple-butter and a variety of other preserves. Also, I had discovered a bed of wild cress in the brook and our brown turkey was garnished with that piquant green. Certainly there was an old-fashioned feeling about our first New England holiday—something precious and genuine, that made all effort and cost worth while.

The Pride and the Hope had come home for a week's vacation and were reveling in the house, which they now for the first time saw in order. Of course their rooms had to be personally adjusted, their own special belongings inspected and put away. Their treasures, after two months of absence, were all new and fresh to them. The Pride, reveling in her own "cozy corner," or curled up in a big chair by the log fire, reread her favorite books; the Hope and the Joy played paper-doll "ladies" on the deep couch, cutting out a whole new generation with up-to-date wardrobes from the costume pages of some marvelous new fashion magazines. Oblivious to the grosser world about them, they caused their respective families to telephone and give parties and visit back and forth, and to discuss openly their most private affairs and move into new houses and make improvements and purchases that would have wrecked Rockefeller if the bills had ever fallen due. That is the glory of make-believe—one may go as far as he likes, building his castles and his kingdoms, with never a cent to pay. It is only when one tries to realize in acres and bricks and shingles that the accounts come in. A spiritistic friend of mine told me recently that the latest communications from the shadow world indicate the life there to be purely mental, that each spirit entity creates its own environment and habitation by thought alone. In a word, it is a world, he said, where imagination is reality and all the dreams come true. Ah me! I hope he is not mistaken! What dreams of empires we have all put away, what air-castles we have seen melt and vanish because of the cost! A place where one may build and plant and renew by the processes of thought alone, unchecked by acreage boundaries or any sordid limitations of ways and means! I cannot think of a better or more reasonable hereafter than that. We get a glimpse of it here in the play of children—little children who perhaps have left the truth not so far behind.

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"Fashion ladies" must relax now and then. Even in late November there were pleasant sunny days when the Hope and the Joy roamed the fields or laid a long board across a tumbled wall and teetered away vacation hours to the tune of

Seesaw,
Marjory Daw,
Sold her bed
and laid on straw,

which was probably first sung a good way back—by Cain and Abel, maybe, in some corner of Eden. No, it would be outside of Eden, for their parents had moved, as I remember, before their arrival. And I wonder if little Cain and Abel had a fire to gather around when the fall evenings began to close in, before the lamps were lit, and if they ever had cakes and toast and sandwiches, with hot chocolate, from an old blue china set from a corner cupboard, and were as hungry as bears, and rocked while they ate and drank and watched the firelight dance on the tea-things and table-legs. If not, I am afraid they missed something, and perhaps it is not to be wondered at that little Cain became gloomy and savage and outcast when he grew up. A fireplace with a cozy cup of chocolate and a bite of something filling will civilize children about as quickly as anything I know of, and would, I am sure, have been good for Cain.

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We often cooked by our fireplace. We hung a kettle over it for tea and toasted bread on Captain Ben Meeker's long iron toasting-fork. Then at supper-time we would rake out the coals, and on one of the old gridirons brought down from the attic would broil a big steak, or some chops, and if they did not taste better than any other steak or chops we certainly imagined they did, and I am still inclined to think we were right. Then there was popcorn, and potatoes roasted in the ashes, and apples on sticks, though this was likely to be later in the evening, when the tribe was hungry again, for children in vacation are always hungry, just little savages, and the best way to civilize them is to feed them, as I have said. It was too bad they must go back to school, and sometimes we wished there were never any such things as schools; and then again, when the house was one wild riot and hurrah, just at a moment when I wanted to reflect, I could appreciate quite fully the beauties of education and certain remote places where under careful direction it could be acquired. But how silent and lonely the house seemed when the Pride and the Hope were gone! How glad we were that Christmas was only a month away!

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III

Under the spell of the white touch

In an earlier chapter I have spoken of our attic as an almost unfailing source of supply. Any sort of vessel or implement we might happen to need was pretty certain to turn up there if we looked long enough. It provided us with jugs and jars, and by and by, when the snow came, a wooden shovel and a bootjack for our rubber boots. I said that probably some day we should find a horse and buggy and harness up there, which was about all that we needed, now. It was just one of those careless remarks we all make on occasion. It never occurred to me that it was tinged with prophecy.

We did not find the horse, harness, and buggy in the attic, but we found them—heired them, to use a good New England word, just as we had heired the other things. The automobile had not yet reached Brook Ridge, but it was arriving in the centers and suburbs, upsetting old traditions, severing old ties. Once we had been commuters on Long Island, and in our happy suburb there still lived a friend to whom the years had brought prosperity and motor-machines. In the earlier, more deliberate years he had found comfort and sufficient speed in an enviable surrey, attached to a faithful family horse which now, alas! was too slow, too deliberate for the pace of wealth and the honk-honk of style. So the old horse stood in the stable, for his owners did not wish to see him go to strangers. But then one day they heard how we had turned ourselves into farmers, and presently word came that if we needed Old Beek (shortened from Lord Beaconsfield), surrey, and harness complete, they were ours to command. They would be delivered to us in the city, the message said, from which point we could drive, or ship, them to the farm. It was a windfall from a clear sky —we said it must be our lucky year. We accepted the quickest way, and were presently in the city to receive Lord Beaconsfield.

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Had it been earlier in the year, during those magic days of September, or even in October, when the drifting leaves had turned the highways into thoroughfares of gold, we should have driven by easy stages the sixty miles, across the hills and far away, to Brook Ridge, resting where the night found us. It was too late for that now. The roadsides were no longer flower-decked or golden. An early snowfall had left them in rather a mixed condition, and the air had a chill in it that did not invite extended travel. We could ship by boat to our nearest Sound port, and the fifteen-mile drive from there seemed no great matter.

We admired the dignity with which His Lordship drew up in front of our New York hotel. He was a large, handsome animal, sorrel as to color, and of a manner befitting his station and advanced years. It was evident that we were not of his class, but with the gentle tact of true nobility he never, either then or later, permitted this difference in rank to make us uncomfortable. He even allowed us to call him "Beek,"

"Old Beek," "good Old Beek," especially when there was a lump of sugar in prospect. He was very human. [Pg 153]

But I anticipate. We were delighted with Lord Beaconsfield and his appurtenances. As for the Joy, she was quite beside herself. Anything with the semblance of a horse would excite the Joy. I got in with the driver, and we made our way to the river-front, where I saw His Lordship to his state-room and the surrey stored away. I don't suppose in all his twenty years he had ever taken a voyage before, but he showed no nervousness or undue surprise, and that night at the port of arrival he came stepping down the gang-plank as unconcernedly as the oldest traveler. We were up and away rather early next morning, for we wished to travel leisurely, and we were not familiar with the road.

On inquiry we learned there were two roads—one to the east and one to the west of a little river, the same that formed a mill-pond in Westbury's door-yard, and here a wide orderly stream flowed into the sea. The "Glen" road—the one to the east—was thought to be the shorter, so we chose that. It was a good selection, so far as scenery was concerned, but if I had the same drive to make again I would go the other way. With the exception of a small box of lunch crackers for the Joy, we had provided no food for the journey, for we said we could stop at a village inn when the time came and get something warm. That was a good idea, only there were no villages. There was not even a country store in that lost land of forest and hill and rocky cliff and desolate open field. Now and then we came to a house, but so dead and forbidding was its aspect that we did not dare even to ask our way. Never a soul appeared in the door-yard, and if smoke came from the chimney it was a thin, blue wisp as from dying embers. The land was asleep, under the spell of the white touch. To knock at one of those houses would have been, as it seemed, to call its occupants from their winter trance. [Pg 154]

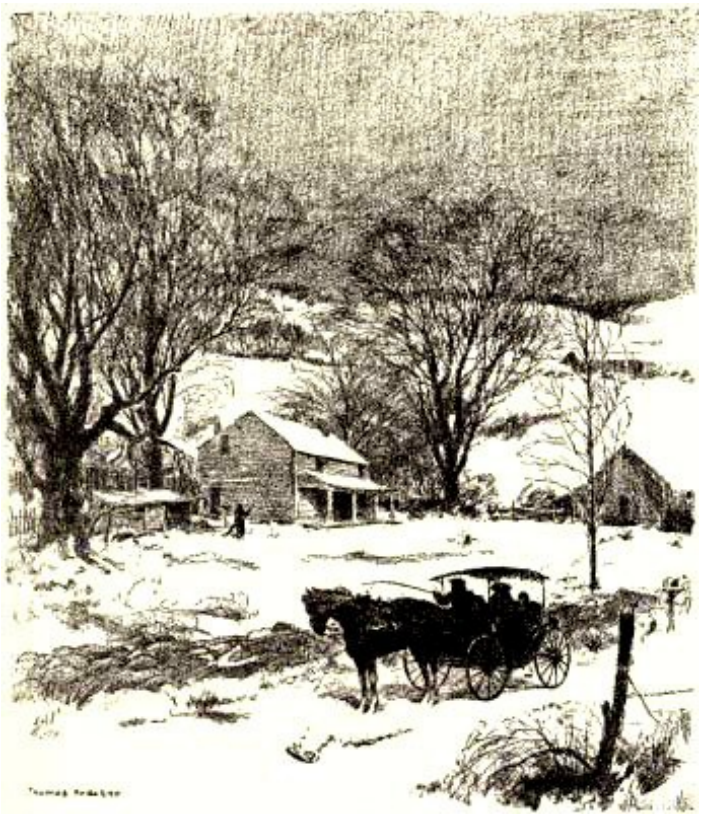
We traveled slowly, for the roads were sticky, and there were many hills. We could not ask Lord Beaconsfield to do more than walk, which he did sturdily enough, tugging up the long hills, though they were probably the first he had ever seen, for his part of Long Island had been level ground. What must he have thought of that chaotic desolation, where most of the woods and a good many of the fields were set up at foolish angles against other woods and fields and where there was no sign of food for man or beast? [Pg 155]

But if we were timid about making inquiries, His Lordship was not. When his appetite became urgent he forgot that he had come of a proud race, and soon after noon-time began to trumpet his demands, and his alarm, like an ordinary horse. His stable at home must have been red, for at every barn of that friendly color—and most of them were of that hue—he sent a clarion neigh across the echoing hills. The Joy, bundled warmly, munched her crackers and made little complaint. Her elders diverted themselves by admiring the winter scenery—the bared woods, lightly dressed with snow, the rocky cliffs and ledges, the tumbling black river that now and again came into

view. [Pg 156]

As the afternoon wore on and we arrived nowhere, we became disturbed by doubts as to our direction. It was true that we seemed to be following the general course of the river, but was it the right river? Hadn't we gone trailing off somewhere on a second-class tributary that had been leading us all day through a weird, bedeviled territory that probably wasn't on the map at all? The brief daylight was fading and it was important that we arrive somewhere, pretty soon. We must make inquiry. It would be better to rouse even one of the seven sleepers than to wander aimlessly into the night. At the next house, I said, we would knock.

But at the next house we actually discovered something moving—something outside. As we came nearer it took the form of a man, a sad man, dragging a crooked limb from a wood-pile. I drew up.



"Good afternoon," I said. "Can you tell us where we are?"

"Good afternoon," I said. "Can you tell us where we are?"

"Why, yes," he grunted, as he worked and pulled at the limb. "You're at Valley Forge."

Valley Forge! Heavens! We were within twenty miles of Philadelphia, on the Schuylkill. At the pace we had been going it did not seem reasonable. This must be enchantment, sure enough. [Pg 157]

"Look here," I said, "you don't mean that this is Valley Forge where Washington was quartered."

"Don't know anything about that," he said, still grunting over the

crooked limb, "but I've been quartered here for more 'n sixty years, an' it's always been the same Valley Forge in my time."

"Is—is this Connecticut?"

"That's what it is."

I breathed easier. If he had said Pennsylvania it would have meant that we were a hundred and fifty miles from home.

"Do you know of any place called the Glen?"

"Of course; right up ahead a few miles. Where'd you folks come from, anyway? You don't appear to know much about locations."

I side-stepped, thanking him profusely. We were all right, then, but it seemed a narrow escape. [Pg 158]

At last we entered the Glen and recognized certain landmarks. It was a somber place now—its aspect weirdly changed since the first days of our coming. Then it had been a riot of summer-time, the cliffs a mat and tangle of green that had shut us in. On this dull December evening, with its vines and shrubs and gaunt trees bare, its pointed cedars and hemlocks the only green, its dark water swirling under overhanging rocks, it had become an entrance to Valhalla, the dim abode of the gods.

How friendly Westbury's lights looked when we crossed the bridge by the mill and turned into the drive, and what gracious comfort there was in his bright fire and warm, waiting supper. We did not go up the hill that night. Good Old Beek found rest and food and society in Westbury's big red barn.

IV

The difficulty was to get busy

I have referred more than once, I am sure, to my study behind the chimney, a tiny place of about seven by nine feet, once, no doubt, the "parlor bedroom." I selected it chiefly because of its size. I said one could condense his thoughts so much better in a limited area. I shelved one side and end of it to the ceiling, put dull-green paper on the walls, padded its billowy floor with excelsior, put down dull-green denim as a rug basis, and painted the woodwork to match. Then I set my work-table in the center, where I could reach almost anything without getting up; and certainly with its capable fireplace it was as cozy and inviting a work-room as one would find in a week's travel.

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The difficulty was to get busy at the condensing process. Work was pressing. Not exactly the work, either, but the need of it. No, I mean the necessity of it. It was the need of funds that was pressing—that is what I have been trying to convey. With all the buying and improving, and the loads of new indispensables that Westbury was constantly bringing from the nearest town of size, the exchequer was running low. I am not really so lazy, once I get started, but I have a constitutional hesitancy in the matter of getting started. My will and enthusiasm are both in good supply, but my ability to sit down and really begin is elusive.

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It was especially so that winter; there were so many excuses for not getting started. Mornings I would rise firm in the resolve that the day and hour were at hand. After breakfast I would determinedly start for the room behind the chimney. Unfortunately I had to pass through our "best room" to get there. There was certain to be a picture or something a little out of place in that room. Whatever it was, it must be attended to. It would annoy me to leave a thing like that unremedied. One's mind must be quite untrammeled to condense. Sometimes I had to rearrange several of the pictures, and straighten the books, and pull the rugs around a little, before I felt ready for the condensing process. But then I would be certain to notice something out in the yard that was not in place. We took a pride in our yard. Once outside, one thing generally led to another, and in the course of time I would be pawing over stuff in the barn. Then it was about luncheon-time—it would hardly be worth starting the condensing business till afterward.

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Perhaps I would actually get into the room behind the chimney after luncheon, but one could not begin work until the fire was replenished and a supply of wood brought. Then while one was at it one might as well get in a supply of fuel for the other fires, so as to have a clear afternoon for a good substantial beginning.

Oh, well, you see where all those paltry subterfuges ended. It was the easiest thing in the world to remember something I wanted to tell Westbury—something important—and our telephone lines were not yet connected. It would be about five when I got back, and of course

one could not start a piece of work late in the day when one was all worn out. To-morrow, bright and early, would be the time.

Then, just as likely as not, to-morrow would be one of those bad-luck days. In a diary which I kept at the time I find a record of a day of that sort. [Pg 162]

> Began this morning by breaking a lamp chimney before I was dressed. I continued by stepping on Pussum's tail on the way down-stairs in the dark, which caused me to slide and scrape the rest of the way. Elizabeth came to the head of the stairs with a fresh lamp and the remark that she thought I had given up using such language. In applying the liniment I upset the greasy stuff on the living-room rug and it required an hour's brisk rubbing to get it out. Not being satisfied with this, I turned over a bottle of ink when I sat down after breakfast to dash off an important note before mail-time. Nobody could think consecutively after a series like that, so I went out for some fresh air and decided to clean up a rough corner by the brook. I scratched my nose, strained my wrist, and mashed my finger with a stone. Only a 100-per-cent. Christian could remain calm on such a day. To-morrow I shall go warily and softly, and really begin work.

I did, in fact, against all intention and good judgment, begin one evening just about bedtime, and worked until quite late. It was not a bad beginning, either, as such things go—at least, I have tried harder and made worse ones. After that the condensing process went better. I could any time find excuses for not working, but I did not hunt for them so anxiously. I was pretty fairly under way by Christmas, and the room behind the chimney had all at once become the most alluring place in the world. [Pg 163]

CHAPTER SIX

I

The magic of the starlit tree

We have always had a tree for Christmas. Long ago, far back in our early flat-dwelling days, we had our first one, and I remember we shopped for it Christmas Eve among the bright little Harlem groceries where they had them ranged outside, picking very carefully for one symmetrical in shape and small of size and price, to fit our tiny flat and, oh yes, indeed, our casual income. I remember, too, that when it was finally bought I put it on my shoulder with a proud feeling, and we drifted farther, picking up the trimmings—the tinsel and gay ornaments, the small gifts for the one very small person who had so recently come to live with us, discussing each purchase with due deliberation, going home at last with rather more than we could afford, I fear, for I recall further that we did not have enough left next morning to buy butter for breakfast. How young we were then, and how poor, and how happy! and Christmas morning, with its twinkling mystery, was the most precious thing of the whole year.

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It still remained so. Time could not dim the magic of the starlit tree. Another little person had come, and another. A larger tree and more decorations were needed, and the presents grew in number and variety, but the old charm of secret preparation, and morning gifts, and the lights that first twinkled around a manger, did not fade.

We did not buy a tree at Brook Ridge. There was no need. Across the road, partway up the slope, was a collection of green and shapely little cedars—a regular Santa Claus grove—and on the afternoon before Christmas, a gray, still afternoon, heavy with mystic portent, Elizabeth and I took a small ax and climbed up there, and picked and selected, just as we had done in those earlier years, and came home with our tree, stealthily carrying it in the back way, to the wood-house, and fitting it to the small green stand that we had used and preserved from year to year. The little girl for whom we had bought the first tree was the Pride, now aged twelve, and no longer without knowledge of the Christmas saint, but the romance of not knowing, of still believing in it all, was too precious to be put away yet, and she was off to bed with the others to bring more quickly the

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joyous morning. Alone, as heretofore, Elizabeth and I tied and marked the tissue packages, and in some of the books wrote rhymes, such as only Santa Claus can think of when he has finished his remote year of toil and has started out with his loaded sleigh to strew happiness around the world. [Pg 167]

I suppose there is no more delightful employment than to watch the thing that will give a splendid joy to one's children grow and glisten under one's hands—to view it at different angles during the process; to note how it begins to look "Christmasy," to add a touch here, a brightness there, to see it at last radiant and complete, ready for the morning illumination. On the topmost branch each year there was always the same little hanging ornament, a swinging tinseled cherub that we had bought for the very first little tree and the very first little girl, in the days when we had been so young, so poor, and so happy.

It was midnight when the last touch was given and the cherub was swinging at the top, and it was only a wink or two afterward, it seemed, that there were callings back and forth from small beds and a general demand for investigation. A hurried semi-dressing, a fire blazing up the chimney, a door thrown open upon a sparkling, spangled tree. Eager exclamations, moments of awed silence, after which the thrilling distribution of gifts. Human life holds few things better or happier than such a Christmas morning. Whatever else the Christ-child brought to the world, that alone would make his coming a boon to mankind. [Pg 168]

On our wall hung a quaint framed print of the first Christmas family, and under it some verses by the now all-but-forgotten poet, Edwin Waugh. In those days it was our custom, when the distribution was over and the morning light filled the room, to gather in front of the picture and sing the verses to a simple tune of our own. It was a poor little ceremony, but, remembering it now, I am glad that we thought it worth while. The verses are certainly so, and I want to preserve them here—they are so little known.

CHRISTMAS CAROL

By Edwin Waugh

Long time ago in Palestine,
Upon a wintry morn,
All in a lowly cattle-shed
The Prince of Peace was born.

The clouds fled from the gloomy sky,
The winds in silence lay,
And the stars shone bright with strange delight
To welcome in that day.

His parents they were simple folk
And simple lives they led,
And in the ways of righteousness
This little child was bred.

In gentle thought and gentle deed
His early days went by,
And the light His youthful steps did lead
Came down from heaven on high.

He was the friend of all the poor
That wander here below;
It was His only joy on earth
To ease them of their woe.

In pain He trod His

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holy path,

tried;

mankind He lived,

He died.

just and pure,

alway,

peace of mind

away.

By sorrow sorely

It was for all

And for mankind

Like Him let us be

Like Him be true

That we may find the

That never fades

II

Westbury dropped in

So came the deeps of winter—January in New England. With the Pride and the Hope back at school, Elizabeth and I, with the Joy, shut away from most of the sounds and strivings of men, looked out on the heaping drifts and gathered about blazing logs, piled sometimes almost to the chimney throat. [Pg 170]

It was our refreshment and exercise to bring in the logs. We were told that in a former day they had been dragged in by a horse, who drew them right up to the wide stone hearth. But we did not use Lord Beaconsfield for this work. For one thing, he would have been too big to get through the door; besides, we were strong, and liked the job. We had two pairs of ice-tongs, and we would put on our rubber boots, and take the tongs, and go out into the snow, and fasten to a log—one at each end—and drag it across Captain Ben's iron door-sill, and lift it in and swing it across the stout andirons with a skill that improved with each day's practice. They were good, lusty sticks—some of them nearly two feet through. These were the back-logs, and they would last two or three days, buried in the ashes, breaking at last into a mass of splendid coals. [Pg 171]

In New England one builds a fire scientifically, if he expects to keep warm by it. There must be a fore-stick and a back-stick, and a pyramid of other sticks, with proper draught below and flame outlets above. And he must not spare fuel—not if he expects heat. Westbury dropped in one afternoon just when we had completed a masterpiece in fire-building. He went up to warm his hands and regarded the blazing heap of hickory with critical appraisal.

"That fire cost you two dollars," he remarked, probably recalling the number of days it had taken Old Pop and Sam to cut and cord the big hickory across the brook.

"It's worth it," I said. "I've paid many a two dollars for luxuries that weren't worth five minutes of this."

Westbury dropped into a comfortable chair, took out his knife, and picked up a piece of pine kindling.

"You think this beats city life?" he observed, whittling slowly.

"Well, that depends on what you want. If you like noise and action, the city's the place. We once lived in a flat where there was a piano at one end of the hall and two phonographs at the other. Then there was a man across the air-shaft who practised on the clarinet, and a professional singer up-stairs. Besides this, when the season was right, we had a hand-organ concert every few minutes on the street. When everything was going at once it was quite a combination. The trolley in front and the Elevated railway behind helped out, too, besides the automobiles, and the newsboys and more or less babies [Pg 172]

that were trying to do their part. Some people would be lonesome without those things, I suppose."

Westbury whittled reflectively.

"I like to be where it's busy," he commented, "but I guess a fellow could get tired of too much of it. It's pretty nice to live where you can look out on the snow and the woods, and where you can hear it rain, and in the spring wake up in the night and listen to the frogs sing." Westbury's eye ranged about the room, taking in the pictures and bric-à-brac and the bookshelves along the wall. "I wonder what Captain Ben Meeker would think to see his old kitchen turned into a [Pg 173] library," he went on, thoughtfully. "Not many books in his day, I guess; maybe one or two on the parlor table, mostly about religion. They were pretty strong on religion, back in that time, though Captain Ben, I guess, didn't go in on it as heavy as his wife. Captain Ben was more for hunting, and horses, and dogs, and the man that could cut the most grass in a day. The story goes that when Eli Brayton, the shoemaker, wanted to marry Molly Meeker, Captain Ben wouldn't give her to him because he said Eli hadn't proved himself a man yet. Brayton was boarding in the family and working in the little shop that used to stand across the road. Aunt Sarah Meeker, Captain Ben's wife, wanted the shoemaker in the family because he was religious; but Captain Ben said, 'No, sir, he's got to prove himself a man before he can have Molly.' Well, one day Eli Brayton saw a fox up in the timber, and came down to the house and told Captain Ben about it. 'Let me have your gun,' he said, 'and I'll go up and get that chap that's been killing your chickens lately.' 'All right,' says Captain Ben, 'but you [Pg 174] won't get him.' Eli didn't say anything, but took the old musket and slipped up there, and by and by they heard a shot and pretty soon he came down the hill with Mr. Fox over his shoulder. They went out on the step to meet him, and he threw the fox down in front of Molly Meeker. 'There's some fur for you,' he said, 'and I guess he won't catch any more chickens.' Captain Ben went up to Eli and slapped him on the shoulder. 'Now you've proved yourself a man,' he says, 'and you can have Molly.' That was my wife's grandmother. She was an only child and the Meekers and the Braytons lived here together. Eli Brayton grew to be quite a character himself. When they came around to him to collect money for the church he'd contribute some of his unpaid shoe accounts. He knew the people that owed them would pay the church, because they'd be afraid not to. Old Deacon Timothy Todd used to do the collecting. He had a high-keyed voice and no front teeth, and always chewed as he talked. He'd pull out the bill and [Pg 175] shake it at the man that owed it and say: 'A debt to the church is registered above. Not to pay it is a mortal sin. To perish in sin is to be burned with brimstone and eaten by the worm that dieth not.' Before Deacon Todd got through that sinner was ready to come across."

Westbury in childhood had seen Deacon Timothy Todd and could imitate his speech and manner. He enjoyed doing it as much as we enjoyed hearing him.

"Deacon Todd had two boys," he went on, "Jim and Tim, and he used

to say, 'My Jim is a good boy, but Tim proved himself a bad one when he slapped his mother with an eel-skin.' Deacon Todd married a second time. He lent some money to a woman to set up a business in Westport, and a little while after his wife died he went down to collect it. Somebody met him on the road and asked him where he was going. 'Well,' he said, 'I'm just going down to Westport to collect a little money I loaned a young woman, and I'll bring back the money or the young woman, one of the two,' and he did. He was back with her next day. Timothy Todd was a great old chap. When the Civil War broke out he didn't want to go. He was getting along pretty well, then—forty or so—and had already lost two of his front teeth and claimed he couldn't bite off the ca'tridges. They used to have to bite off the paper ends of them for muzzle-loading guns. Then the draft came and he was scared up for fear they'd get him. They didn't, though, but they got about all the others that were left, and Deacon Todd went down to see them off. When the train came and he saw them all get on, and the train starting, he forgot all about not wanting to go, and jumped on with them, and went. 'I saw all my friends was goin',' he said, 'an' th'd be nobody left in the country but me. "I reckon I can bite them ca'tridges off with my eye-teeth, if I really want to do it," I says, an' I was on the train an' half-way to Danbury before I recollected that Mrs. Todd had told me to bring home a dime's wuth o' coffee an' a pound o' sugar. I didn't get back with 'em fer two years, an' then I come in limpin' with a bullet in my left hind leg. "Here's that pound o' coffee and dime's wuth o' sugar," I says. "I waited fer 'em to git cheaper."'"

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Westbury's visits did much to brighten up the somber days, while our blazing hearth and the sturdy little furnace down-stairs kept us warm and cozy. Looking out on a landscape that was like a Christmas card, and remembering the drabble and jangle of the town, we were not sorry to be among the clean white hills.

III

No animal except man digs and plants

It was only a little after Christmas that we began planning for our spring garden. As commuters, we had once possessed a garden—a bit of ground, thirty-five feet square, but fruitful beyond belief. Now we had broad, enriched spaces that in our fancy we saw luxuriant with vegetable and bright with flower.

I suppose one of the most deeply seated of human instincts is to plant and till the soil. It is the thing that separates us most widely from other animal life. The beasts and birds and insects build houses, lay up food, and some of them, even if unwittingly, change the style of their clothing with the seasons. But no animal except man digs and plants and cultivates the flower and fruit and vegetable that nourish his body and soul. It is something that must date back to creation, for in the deepest winter, when the ground is petrified and the skies are low and gray, the very thought of turning up the earth, and raking and planting, awakens a thrill in the innermost recesses of the normal human heart, while a new seed-catalogue, filled with gay pictures and gaudy promises, becomes a poem, nothing less. [Pg 178]

What gardens we anticipate when the snow lies deep and we pore over those seductive lists by a blazing fire! Never a garden this side of Paradise so fair as they. For there are no weeds in our gardens of anticipation, nor pests, nor drought, nor any blight. The sun always shines there, and purple flowers are waving in the wind. No real garden will ever be so beautiful, because it will never quite be bathed in the tender light, never wave with quite the loveliness of those fair, frail gardens of our dreams. [Pg 179]

We planted many dream gardens that winter. Splendid catalogues came every little while, and each had its magic of color and special offers—"Six rare roses for a dollar," "Six papers of seeds for ten cents"—six of anything to make the heart happy, for a ridiculously small sum. The rich level behind the barn was to us no longer hard with frost and buried beneath the drifts, but green and waving. Some days we walked out to look over the ground a little and pick the places where we would have things, but our imagination seemed to work better in the house by the big fireplace, especially when we rattled the buff-and-green seed-packets that presently began to come and were kept handy in the sideboard drawer.

Our former garden had been so small that we feared we should not have enough for these new areas, and almost daily we increased certain staples and discovered something we had overlooked, some "New Wonder" tomato, or "Murphy's Miracle" melon. Being strong for melons, I pinned my faith to Murphy's Miracle, and ordered several packets of the seeds that would produce it. Then I began to have doubts. I said if half those seeds sprouted and did half as well as the catalogue promised, the level behind the barn would fall a prey to [Pg 180]

Murphy and become just a heap of melons. Elizabeth suggested that I add another acre and devote my summer vacation to peddling them.

Elizabeth was mainly for salads. Anything that could be served with French dressing or mayonnaise found a place on her list. She got a new copy of her favorite Iowa catalogue, and when she found in it a special combination offer of "Twelve new things to eat raw" (it had formerly been nine) she was moved almost to tears.

In the matter of sweet corn and beans our souls were as one—a sort of spiritual succotash, as it were—and we encouraged one another in any new departure that would increase or prolong this staple supply. Flowers we would have pretty much every-where—hollyhocks in odd corners; delphinium and foxglove along the stone walls; bunches of calliopsis and bleeding-heart and peonies; borders of phlox and alyssum; beds of sweet-williams and corn-flowers and columbines—all those lovely, old-fashioned things, with the loveliest old-fashioned names in the world. Where did they get those names, I wonder? for they are among the most wonderful in the language—each one a strain of word music. We ordered hollyhock roots and hollyhock seed, and delphinium roots and delphinium seed, and all the others in roots and seeds that could be had in both ways, and roses and roses and roses, till I found it desirable to lay aside the fascinating catalogues now and then for certain industries in the little room behind the chimney, which I called my study, in order to be able to provide the "inclosed stamps or check, in payment for the same."

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But I believe there is no money that one spends so willingly as that invested in garden seeds. That is because the normal human being is a visionary, a speculator in futures, a dealer in dreams. For every penny he spends in winter he pictures an overflowing return in beauty or substance, in flower and fruit, the glorious harvest of radiant summer days.

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IV

Then came Bella—and Gibbs

We had other entertainments. I have not thus far mentioned the domestic service that followed Lazarus. There was a hiatus of brief duration, and then came Bella—Bella and Gibbs. Bella was from town and of literary association. We inherited her from authors whose ideals perhaps did not accord with hers—I do not know. At all events, she tried ours for a period. I know that she was considerably middle-aged, hard of hearing, and short of sight, and that when I tried to recall her name I could not think of anything but "Hunka-munka." Heaven knows why—it must have expressed her, I suppose.

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But Hunka-munka—Bella, I mean—had resources. Her specialties were Kipling and deep-dish apple pie. We could have worried along without Kipling, but her deep-dish pie with whipped cream on it was a poem that won our hearts. I must be fair. Hunka-munka's cooking was all good, as to taste, and if her vision had been a bit more extended it might have been of better appearance. I suppose the steam collected on her super-thick glasses and she had to work somewhat by guess. Never mind—I still recall her substantial and savory dinners with deep gratitude, especially the pie of the deep dish with whipped cream atop.

Gibbs came when we acquired Lord Beaconsfield and the furnace. My gifts do not run to the care of a horse and an egg-coal fire. I don t know where Gibbs had matriculated, but he professed to have taken high degrees in those functions, and thus became a part of our establishment. I think he overestimated his powers in the directions named, but he was not without talents. He could wash and wipe dishes and, incredible as it may seem, he was also literary. Like attracts like, by some law past understanding. To me it still seems a wonderful thing that this little waif of a man with a taste for Tolstoy and a passion for long words should have just then landed upon us.

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Gibbs had a warm and fairly snug room in the barn—"a veritable bijou of an apartment," he called it, though it was, I think, something less, and he declared that the aroma of the hay and the near presence of Lord Beaconsfield gave him a "truly bucolic emotion" that was an inspiration. Nevertheless, Gibbs could not resist Bella and her

domain. This was proper enough. He was convenient to hand her things, to help with the dishes and to discuss deeply and at length their favorite authors. When our meals were in preparation or safely over there was more literature, five to one, in the kitchen than in any other part of the house. [Pg 185]

Sometimes the drift of it came to us. It was necessary for Gibbs to speak up pretty smartly to get his remarks into Hunka-munka's consciousness. Once in the heat of things we heard him say: "One may not really compare or contrast the literary emanations of Tolstoy and Kipling except as to the net human residuum. Difference in environment would preclude any cosmic psychology of interrelationship."

As this noble sentence came hurtling through the door I felt poor and disheartened. Never could I hope to reach such a height. And here was Gibbs washing dishes and tossing off those things without a thought. Hunka-munka's reply was lost on us. Like many persons of defective hearing, she had the habit of speaking low, but I do not think her remarks were in the gaudy class of her associate's.

Their discussions were not entirely of Tolstoy and Kipling. There was a neighborhood library and they took books from it—books which I judge became more romantic as the weeks went by. I judge this because Gibbs grew more careful in the matter of dress, and when the days became pleasanter the two walked down to the bridge across the brook and looked over into the water, after the manner of heroes and heroines in the novels of Mrs. Southworth and Bertha M. Clay. [Pg 186]

What might have been the outcome of the discussions, the dish-washings, the walks, the leanings over the bridge at the trysting-place, we may only speculate now. For a time the outlook for this "romance of real life" seemed promising, then came disillusion. Gibbs, alas, had a bent which at first we did not suspect, but which in time became only too manifest. It had its root in a laudable desire—the desire to destroy anything resembling strong drink. Only, I think he went at it in the wrong way. His idea was to destroy it by drinking it up. He miscalculated his capacity. It took no great quantity of strong waters to partially destroy Gibbs, and at such times he was neither literary nor romantic, no fit mate for Hunka-munka, who had a tidy sum in savings laid away and did not wish to invest it in the destroying process. I do not know what she said to him, at last, but there came a day when he vanished from our sight and knowledge, and the kitchen after dinner was silent. I suppose the change was too much for Hunka-munka, for she saddened and lost vigor. Her deep-dish pies became savorless, the whipped cream smeary and sad of taste. She went the way of all cooks, and if it had not been spring, with the buds breaking and the birds calling and the trout leaping in the brook, we should have grieved as over a broken song. [Pg 187]

CHAPTER SEVEN

We planted a number of things

he whistle of a bird means spring; the poking through of the skunk-cabbage in low ground, the growing green mist upon the woods. But there is one thing that has more positive spring in it than any of these—more of the stir and throb of awakening, something identified with that earliest impulse that prompted some remote ancestor to make the first garden. I mean the smell of freshly turned earth with the sun on it. Nothing else is like that; there is a kind of madness in it. Elizabeth said it was a poem. It is that and something more—a pæan, a marching song—a summons to battle.

Luther Merrill came up to plow the space back of the barn. When he had turned up a furrow or so to the warm April sun, and I got a whiff of it, reason fled. I began capering about with a rake and a hoe, shouting to Elizabeth to bring the seeds—all the seeds—also the catalogues, so that we might order more. Why, those little packages were only a beginning! We must have pounds, quarts, bushels. And we must have other things—sweet-potatoes, for instance, and asparagus—we have overlooked those. [Pg 189]

Elizabeth came, and was bitten by that smell, too, but she partially kept her balance. She was in favor of the asparagus and sweet-potatoes, but she said she thought we had better plant what we had of the other things and see how far they would go, before ordering more. She said the seed-houses would probably have enough to go around even a week or so later, and we could use what we had on hand in making what the catalogues referred to as the "first sowing." I was not entirely satisfied, but I submitted. I was too much excited, too glad, to oppose anything. Luther Merrill plowed around and around, and then harrowed and cross-harrowed, while we sorted the yellow packets and picked the earliest things and were presently raking and marking on beds and rows, warm with the fever of tillage. [Pg 190]

We did not always agree as to the order of planting. In our small commuter garden we had been restricted by space limitations and had fallen into the habit of planting rows a good deal closer together than the directions on the packets said—an economy of ground, but not of toil. I had frequently weeded the beds, and had found that my feet were not suited to working between rows six inches apart, while even a baby-sized hoe had to be handled with great care. I said, now that we had the space, we would separate our rows of beets and radishes and salad full ten to fourteen inches, as advised by the authorities who had written the package directions, and thus give both the plants and the gardener more room.

But Elizabeth had acquired the economy habit. She declared that such rows gave more room for the weeds and that it was too bad to waste the rich ground in that way. I had to draw the most pathetic picture of myself bending over in the hot sun, working with a toy hoe, and pulling weeds with my fingers, through long July days, to effect a compromise. Experience had taught me that this was the best way to get concessions from Elizabeth. Little could be gained by polemic argument. Besides, it was dangerous. She would resign, and a good deal more than half the joy would go out of that precious employment if I was left to finish it alone. Women are so volatile. It is their main attraction.

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The Joy helped us. That is, she had a little hoe and insisted on digging with it in the very places where we were raking and marking and sowing and patting down the fragrant earth that was presently to wax green with fruitfulness. She was not satisfied to go off in a remote corner and make a garden of her own. She was strong for community life, and required close watching. It was necessary, at last, to let her plant a crooked little row without direction or artistic balance. Then she suddenly remembered that she was not a gardener, but a horse, and plowed and harrowed back and forth across the mellow ground.

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We planted a number of things that first day of our gardening in Brook Ridge—long rows of lettuce and radishes and pease—the last named two kinds, the bush and dwarf varieties. Pease cannot be sown too early, nor the other things, for that matter. I have known the ground to freeze solid after lettuce and radishes had begun to sprout, without serious resulting damage. We put in some beets, too, and some onions, but we postponed the corn and bean planting. There is nothing gained by putting those tender things in too early. Even if they sprout, they do not thrive unless the weather is really warm, while a light frost lays them low. More than once I have tried very early corn-planting, but never with much result. Once I had quite a patch of it up about three inches high when the wind suddenly went to the north and it was certain that the night would bring frost. I gathered up all the old cans and boxes and hats on the premises and covered every hill of it. That was a good scheme, and most of my corn survived, but six weeks later, when it was green and waving, a neighbor's cow got in and ate it to the last piece. No, fate is against early corn-planting.

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We had seed enough for all we wanted to plant that first day, and a good deal more than enough of some things. It's remarkable how many lettuce seeds there are in a buff packet. I sowed and sowed without being able to use up two packets. I don't see how they can raise and gather so many for five cents. It was the same with most of the other things. I did not need to reorder, and by night I did not particularly want to. It had been a pretty long day of raking and digging and patting down, and I had got over some of the intoxication of the earth smell. Also, I was lame. I could see that tending a garden of the size we had planned—along, say, in July—was going to be a chore. No one as yet had come to replace our ex-domestic staff: if no one came that chore would fall to me. In the gray of the evening my enthusiasm was at rather low ebb. It was all I could do to make out an

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order for asparagus and sweet-potato plants. A cool, quiet bed, in a spring land where frogs are peeping in the moist places, is sweet after such a day.

II

Out of the blue

We were not permanently abandoned, however. Bella and Gibbs, our literary forces, were presently replaced by Lena and William. Lena and William were not literary. William was just plain Tipperary, and Lena was a Finn. I extracted Lena one day from a "Norsk Employment Agency," selecting her chiefly for her full-moon smile and her inability to speak any English word. The smile had a permanent look, and I reasoned that an inability to speak English would be a bar to her getting away. We should not mind it much ourselves. Having had everything from a Pole to a Patagonian, we were experts on sign language, and rather favored it after the flow of English we had just survived. I personally conducted Lena to the train and landed her safely at Brook Ridge. [Pg 195]

William came to us out of the blue. One morning I drew a tin pail of water, bright and splashing from the well, and turned to pour a little of it into the birds drinking-trough, a stone hollowed out at the top. I did not do so, however, for a good reason—a man was sitting on the stone. He had not been there a moment before, and I had heard no sound. He was gaunt, pale, and dilapidated, and looked as if he had been in a sort of general dog fight. He had a wild cast in his eyes and was in no way prepossessing. His appearance suggested a burglar on sick-leave.

I confess I was startled by this apparition. I set down the pail rather weakly.

"Why, good morning!" I said.

He replied in a high-keyed Irish intonation, at the moment rather feeble in volume.

"C'u'd ye give a man a bite to eat fer some worrk, now?" he asked.

I was relieved. If he had demanded my purse I should not have been surprised. I nodded eagerly. [Pg 196]

"Yes, indeed. We need some wood. If you'll cut a little, I'll see that you have some breakfast. You'll find the wood-pile and the ax down there by the barn."

He rose by a sort of slow unfolding process, and I was impressed by his height. I gave him some specifications as to the wood needed, and he was presently swinging the ax, though without force. He lacked "pep," I could see that, and as soon as the food was ready I called him. He ate little, but he emptied the pot of hot coffee in record time. Then he came down to where I was trimming some rose-bushes.

"W'u'd ye let me lie a bit on the hay?" he said. "Thin I'll do some more of the little shtove-shticks fer yeh. I'm feelin' none too brisk this

mornin'."

"Been sick?" I asked.

"Naw, just a trrifle weery with trav'lin' an' losin' of sleep."

Inside I hesitated. It was probably overtime at housebreaking that had told on him. I pointed at the barn, however.

"All right," I said, "take a nap—only, don t smoke in there." [Pg 197]

He vanished, and some three hours later when I had forgotten him I suddenly heard a sound of great chopping. Our guest had reappeared at the wood-pile, transformed. He was no longer pale and listless. His face was ruddy—in fact, tanned. The cast in his eye had taken on fire. Every movement was of amazing vigor and direction. The wood-pile was disappearing and the little heap of "stove-sticks" growing in a most astonishing way. I called Elizabeth out to see.

"If coffee and a nap will make him do that." I said, "we'd better give him dinner and get enough wood to last all summer." I went down there. "What is your name?" I asked.

"William—William Deegan."

"Well, William, you seem to understand work. Come up to dinner presently, and if you want to go on cutting this afternoon I'll pay you for it."

He came, and there was nothing the matter with his appetite this time. Ham and eggs, potatoes, beans, corn-bread, pie—whatever came went. William was the apostle of the clean plate. Reflecting somewhat on the matter, I reached the conclusion (and it was justified by later events) that William had perhaps been entertaining himself with friends the night before—during several nights before, I judge—and was suffering from temporary reaction when he had appeared on our horizon. Coffee and a nap had restored him. He was quick on recovery, I will say that. [Pg 198]

You never saw such a hole in a wood-pile as he made that afternoon. When I went down to settle with him and announce supper he was still in full swing, apparently intending to go on all night.

"William," I said, "you're a boss hand with an ax."

"Well, sur," said William, his Celtic timbre pitched to the sky, "if I could be shtayin' a day or two longer I'd finish the job fer ye."

Was this a proposition to rob the house and murder us in our beds? I looked at the wood-pile and at William. There was something about their intimate relations that had an honest look. I remembered the extensive garden that would have to be hoed in July. [Pg 199]

"Where would you go from here?" I said.

"I don't know, sur. I'll be lookin' fer a job."

"Do you understand gardening and taking care of a horse and cow?"

"Yes, sur, I do that."

I had an impulse to ask him about his last job, but I checked it. It was a question that could lead to embarrassment. I would accept him on his demonstration, or not at all.

"So you want a summer job, at general farm-work?"

"Yes, sur, I do."

"Well, William, you've found one, right here."

Even after the lapse of a dozen years I cannot write of William without a tugging at the heart. We never knew his antecedents—never knew where behind the sky-line he had been concealed all those years before that morning when he appeared, pale and unannounced, at the well. We got the impression, as time passed, that he had once been married and that he had at some time been somewhere on a peach-farm. With the exception of certain brief intervals—of which I may speak later—he remained with us three years, and that was as much as we ever knew, for he talked little, and not at all of the past. His face value was certainly not much, and some of his habits could have been improved, but a more faithful and honest soul than William Deegan never lived.

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III

"Ah, the bonny cow!"

We had acquired Mis' Cow a few weeks before William's arrival. It was partly on account of the milk that we wanted her, partly because there was an empty stall next to Old Beek's and we thought she would be company for him, partly because we wanted a cow in the landscape—a moving picture of her in the green pasture across the road—finally (and I believe principally) because we have a mania for restoring things and Mis' Cow looked as if she needed to be restored. [Pg 201]

She was owned by a man who was moving away—moving because he had not made a success of chicken-farming by book, and still less of Mis' Cow. He was not her first owner, nor her second, nor her third. I don't know what his number was on her list of owners, but I know if he had kept her much longer he would have been her last one. More than once we had bought the mere frame of a haircloth couch, and taken an esthetic pleasure in having it polished and upholstered, and made into a thing of beauty and service. It was with this view that we acquired Mis Cow, who at the moment was a mere frame with a patchy Holstein covering and a feebly hanging tail. We gave thirty-five dollars for her, and the man who was moving because he had not made a success of chickens threw in a single buggy that broke down the week after he left.

We consulted Westbury on the matter of Mis' Cow's past history, and it was the only time I ever knew W. C. Westbury to be inexact as to the age and habits of any animal in Brook Ridge. He said he had always known her as a good milker, but that she had been unfortunate of late years in her owners. He couldn't remember her age, but he didn't think it was enough to hurt her. My opinion is that he could have given her exact birthday and record had he really tried, but that kindness of heart prompted him to encourage a trade that might improve her fortunes. I suspect that they had played together in childhood. [Pg 202]

We managed to get Mis' Cow up the hill and into her stall, where we could provide her with upholstery material. The little pasture across the road was getting green and she presently had the full run of it. The restoring progress began, as it were, overnight. If ever an article of furniture paid a quick return in the matter of looks, she did. She could never be a very fat Mis' Cow—she was not of that build. But a few days of good food and plenty of it certainly worked wonders. She filled out several of the most alarming hollows around her hips and along her ridge-pole, she seemingly took on height and length. She grew smooth, even glossy; her tail no longer hung on her like a bell-cord, but became a lithe weapon of defense that could swat a fly with fatal precision on any given spot of her black-and-white area. It was only a little while until we were really proud to have her in the landscape, and the picture she made grazing against the green or [Pg 203]

standing in the apple shade was really gratifying. When the trees were pink and white with bloom and Mis' Cow rested under them, chewing in time to her long reflections, we often called one another out to admire the pastoral scene. A visiting friend of Scotch ancestry was moved to exclaim, "Ah, the bonny cow!"

Then there was the matter of milk—she certainly justified Westbury's reputation in that respect. From a quart or two of thin, pale unusable fluid her daily dividend grew into gallons of foaming richness that became pitchers of cream and pounds of butter; for Elizabeth, like myself, had known farming in an earlier day, and rows of milk-pans and a churn went with her idea of the simple life. All day Mis' Cow munched the new grass, and night and morning yielded a brimming pail. She was a noble worker, I will say that.

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But there was another side to Mis' Cow—a side which Westbury forgot to mention. Mis' Cow was an acrobat. When she had been on bran mash and clover for a few weeks she showed a decided tendency to be gay—to caper and kick up her heels—to break away into the woods or down the road, if one was not watching. But this was not all—this was mere ordinary cow nature, which is more foolish and contrary than any other kind of nature except that which goes with a human being or a hen. I was not surprised at these things—they were only a sign that she was getting tolerably restored, according to specifications. But when one day I saw her going down the road, soon after I had turned her into the pasture and carefully put up the bars, I realized that she had special gifts. Stone walls did not a prison make —not for her. Elizabeth and I rounded her up and got her back into the pasture, and from concealment I watched her. She fed peacefully enough, for some time, then, doubtless believing herself unobserved, she took a brief promenade along the wall until she came to what looked like a promising place, and simply walked over it, like a goat.

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We herded her into the barn, and I engaged a man to put a string of wire above the wall. That was effective as long as it was in repair. But it was Mis' Cow's business to see that it did not remain in repair permanently. She would examine it during idle moments, pick out a weak spot in the entanglement, and pull it flat with her horns. Or where the wall was broad enough at the top she would climb up and walk it, just for exercise, stepping over when she got ready. If she could have been persuaded to do those things to order I could have sold her to a circus. It was necessary to reinforce the wire and add another string.

Even that was not always a cure. I came home from the city one night, after a hard day. Elizabeth and the Joy, with Old Beek, had met me at the station, and as we drove up the hill in the dim evening I said how glad I was to get home, and that Elizabeth had milked, so that I could drop into a chair and eat my supper and rest, the minute I entered the house. We reached the top of the hill just then, and a dim gray shadow met and passed us in the velvet dusk. It was Mis' Cow, starting out to spend the night. She was moving with a long, swinging trot, and in another second I was out and after her.

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She had several rods' start and could run downhill better than I could, especially in the dark. It seemed to me that every step I went plunging out into space. My empty stomach became demoralized, the blood rushed to my head. "Gosh dern a cow, anyway!" By the time we had reached Westbury's and started up the next hill I had made up my mind to sell her—to give her away—to drive her off the premises. Some people were standing in front of the next house and they laughed as we went by, we being about neck and neck at the time. Westbury was in that crowd, and for the moment our friendship was in grave danger. But then we came to the house of the man who had made a failure of book chicken-farming, and she darted in. She had remembered it as her home and wanted to return to it. Imagine wanting to go back to such a home!

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Westbury came, and we got a rope on her and led her uphill. I suppose I felt better in the morning, and it was about this time that William arrived on the scene. William loved Mis' Cow and did not mind chasing her up and down the road and through the bushes, though sometimes during the summer, when he had had a hard day with her, and our windows were open, we could hear him still hi-hi-ing and whooping in his sleep, chasing Mis' Cow through the woods of dream.

IV

Strawberries and trout. How is that for a combination?

I remember that as a golden summer, an enthusiastic summer, and, on the whole, a successful one

I remember that as a golden summer, an enthusiastic summer, and, on the whole, a successful one. Our early garden grew—also the second planting and the third. William Deegan made it his business to see that they did. I realized presently that my special forte lay in directing a sizable garden like that rather than in performing the actual labor, especially when June arrived and the sun began to approach the perpendicular and take on callithump. You probably don't know what callithump is, but you will find out if you undertake to hoe sod-ground potatoes in July. It has something to do with brazen trumpets and violence.

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I became acquainted with callithump when I straightened out the asparagus-bed. The weeds had got a master start there, and the feeble feathery asparagus shoots were quite overtopped and lost. I said the job required a microscopic eye and a delicate hand. I would set the asparagus-bed in order myself.

It is surprising how much ground a hundred asparagus roots can cover. Elizabeth had superintended their planting, during a period when I had been absent, and, remembering my mania for having things far apart, she had let herself go in the matter of space. She had made it rich, too, and the weeds just loved it. Some of them were up to my waist. I said they would have to be pulled by hand and I would get up in the cool of the morning and do it.

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It is almost impossible to beat the sun up in June. I was out there at five o'clock, but the sun was already busy and had got the range. By the time I had pulled half-way down one row I could feel the callithump working. Also something else. We claimed to have no mosquitoes in Brook Ridge, so it could not have been those. Whatever it was kept me swearing steadily, and pawing and slapping and sweating blood. When I had finished a row I crept in, got some fresh clothes and a towel, and made a dash for the brook. I had cleaned out a special pool behind the ice-house, and built a little dressing-platform. In less than a minute I was in the water, looking up at the sky and hearing the birds sing. Talk about luxury! After breakfast I took Elizabeth out to show her my progress.

"It looks nice," she said, "and how easily you did it!" [Pg 210]

It took me four memorable mornings to finish the asparagus-bed, and, proud as I was of the job, I resigned, after that, in favor of William. The brazen trumpets of the sky even at high noon could not phase W. Deegan. Often in July I have sat in the maple shade, with pride watching him carry out my directions concerning weeds and potato-bugs. I admired and honored William. I have the greatest respect for honorable toil, but even more for callithump.

Sometimes in the early morning I went trout-fishing. There is more fascination and less waste tissue in that. I would creep down while the house was still and get my rod and basket, and take a sheltered lane that was like a green tunnel through the woods, where the birds were just tuning up for a concert, then out across the "bean-lot," to strike the brook at about the head of navigation—for trout.

They were plenty enough and just of the right size—that is to say, eight to eleven inches long—and easy enough to get if one was very careful. You could not cast for them; the brook was too small and brushy for that. You had to use a very short line, and wind it around the [Pg 211]
end of the rod, and work it through the branches, and then carefully, very carefully, unwind and let the hook drop lightly on the water. Then as likely as not there would be a swift, tingling tug, and, if you were lucky, an instant later you would have a beautiful red-speckled fellow landed among the grass and field flowers, his gay colors glancing in the sun.

The open places also required maneuvering. One does not walk up to the bank and fish for wild trout—not in a stream that is as clear as glass and where every fish in it can see the slightest movement on the bank. To fish such a place is to lie flat on the stomach and work forward inch by inch through the grass, Indian fashion, until the water is in reach. Even then you must not look, but feel, unwinding the line slowly, slowly, until the fly or worm taps the water. Then if you have done it well and the trout is there, and it is June, there will be results—
sharp, quick, sudden results that insure the best breakfast in the world [Pg 212]
—hot fried trout, fresh from a New England brook.

The Joy went with me on some of these excursions. She liked to have

me call her early and go tiptoing and whispering about our preparations and to wade off through the dewy grass in her rubber boots, leaving the rest of the house asleep. She generally carried the basket, and was deeply interested in my maneuvers when the cry of the "teacher"-bird and the call of the wood-thrush did not distract her attention. I can still see the grass up to her fat little waist, her comical blue apron, her dimpled round face and the sunlight on her hair. She had a deep pity for the trout, but her sporting instinct was deeper still. Sometimes when there was a slip, and a big shining fellow would go bouncing and splashing back into the brook, she would jump up and down and demand, excitedly:

"Why didn't you catch that one, Daddy? Why didn't you catch him? That was a big, big, *big* one?" And she walked very proudly when we had six or more to carry back for breakfast.

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Strawberries and trout—how is that for a breakfast combination in June? Trout just from the water and strawberries fresh from the garden. We had planted a good patch of strawberries the August of our arrival and they had done wonderfully well for the first year. Often by the time we had come from fishing Elizabeth had been out and filled a bowl, and sometimes even made a short-cake, for we were old-fashioned enough to love short-cake—old-fashioned short-cake made with biscuit dough (not the sweet-cake kind) for breakfast. And breakfast with trout and short-cake—short-cake with cream, mind you!—in New England in June, when the windows open on the grass and the wood-thrushes are calling, is just about as near paradise as you can get in this old world.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

I

Fate produced a man who had chickens to sell

ith June the Pride and the Hope came home from school. The brook, the barn, Old Beek, and Mis' Cow all had their uses then—also a tent in the yard, a swing, hammock and whatnot. When God made the country He made it especially for children. Burning suns, a weedy garden and potato blight may dismay the old, but such things do not fret the young mind. As long as the brook is cool and the fields are sweet and there is fresh milk and succotash on the table, happy childhood is indifferent to care.

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We were given to picnics. Often we packed some food things into a basket and went into the woods and spread them in a shady place. Lena, the Finn, sometimes accompanied these excursions and went quite mad with the delight of them, racing about and digging up flowers and shrubs to plant in the door-yard, fairly whooping it up in joyful Finnish and such English words as she had acquired. I believe the aspect of our woods reminded her of Finland.

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Lena was a good soul, that is certain, and measurably instructive. We learned from her how priceless is the gift of good nature, which was the chief thing that kept her with us; also, to eat a number of dishes quite new to us, and that an apple-tree—or perhaps it was an apple, baked or in dumpling—was, in her speech, an "ominy poo." She was not strong on desserts, but she could always fall back on the ominy poo—meaning in a general way the big sweet-apple tree that grew by the barn and was loaded to the breaking-point with delicious fruit. Any baked apple is good, but a big, cold, baked sweet-apple—"punkin sweets," Westbury called them—with cold cream, plenty of it, and a sprinkle of sugar, is about the most blithesome thing in the world. Hurrah for the ominy poo! whether it be the tree, or the fruit, baked or in dumplings. When the strawberry passed and was not, the ominy poo reigned gloriously. I don't know what Lena called certain other dishes that from time to time she tried to substitute—some other kind of poo, maybe—I know we gradually persuaded her away from them into a better way of life.

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Sometimes we joined our picnics with the Westburys'—loaded our baskets into a little hand-express wagon, or into the surrey behind Lord Beaconsfield—and these were quite elaborate affairs that required a good deal of preparation and meant a general holiday. More than once we spread long tables on the green of Westbury's shaded lawn that sloped down to the river and the mill, and was a picture-place, if ever there was one. Other days we went over the hills for huckleberries—and came home with pails of the best fruit that grows for pies, bar none. Happy days—days of peace—a true golden age, as it seems now. Will the world, I wonder, ever be so happy and golden again?

We had no intention of embarking in chickens when we settled in Brook Ridge. Neither of us had any love for chickens on foot, and we had no illusions about the fortunes that, according to certain books, could be made from a setting of eggs and a tin hen—an incubator, I mean. Also, our experiment with pigs had cooled us in the matter of live stock for profit. [Pg 218]

Still, we did love chickens in their proper place—that is to say, with dumplings or dressing and some of the nice jellies and things which Elizabeth had made during those autumn months of our arrival. It seemed extravagant to have them often; chickens had become chickens since our long-ago early acquaintance with them, when "two bits" had been a fancy price for broilers and old hens. Elizabeth finally conceded that perhaps a few chickens—a very few, kept in a neat inclosure away from the garden—might be desirable. It would be so handy to have one when we wanted it. She even hinted that the sound of a satisfied and reflective hen singing about the barn would add a rural note to our pastoral harmony. Then, of course, there would be the eggs.

Fate produced a man, just at that moment, who had chickens to sell. He had been called away, and would let his flock go cheap—he had about a dozen, he thought, assorted as to age and condition. We could have them for fifty cents each. It seemed an opportunity. William Deegan was instructed to prepare the neat inclosure, which he did with enthusiasm, William being enamoured of anything that was alive. [Pg 219]

The man who had been called away had made a poor count of his flock. He arrived with nearly twice as many as he said, but we were in the mood by that time, and took over the bunch. They were not a very inspiring lot. They were of no special breed, but just chickens—a long-legged, roostery set, with a mixture of frazzled hens of years and experience. We said, however, that food and care would improve them. Remember what it had done for Mis' Cow.

"Ye'll be after eatin' thim roosters, prisently," William commented, as we looked at them through the inclosing wire, "before they be gettin' much older. Ye'll be wantin' eggs from the hins."

William's remark seemed wise. We were wanting the eggs, all right, and those ten or twelve speedy-looking roosters ought to go to the platter without much delay. We would feed liberally and begin on the best ones, forthwith. [Pg 220]

Still, we did not have chicken that day, nor the next. There is nothing so perverse as the human appetite. Those were not really bad chickens, and in a few days they were much better. If any one of those middle-aged roosters had been brought to us by the butcher we would have paid the usual dollar for it, and, baked and browned and served with fixings, it would have gone well enough, even though a trifle muscular and somewhat resilient.

But somehow this was a different proposition. I don't believe I can explain just why. There was something about the aggregation as a whole that was discouraging. I suspect William's remark that they must be eaten "prisently" had something to do with it. Eating those chickens was not to be an entertainment, a pastime, but a job—a job that increased, for the "old hins" did not lay, or very sparingly—an egg [Pg 221] a day being about the average. William brought it in solemnly. We had got to devour that entire flock of chickens, and the thought became daily less attractive. Even our tribe of precious ones, who had always been chicken-hungry before, suddenly became indifferent to the idea of chicken fried, baked, or in fricassee. I said, at last, we would have to have a series of picnics. Anything would taste good at a picnic.

I don't remember how many we used up in that way, but I know the business of getting rid of those chickens seemed interminable. We tried working them off on William and Lena, but even *they* balked before the end was reached. I have heard it stated that no one can eat thirty quails in thirty days. I don't know about that, but I know that when we tried to put over a dozen chickens on Lena and William in six weeks it was a failure. At last we were reduced to one old hen, who by general consent was made immune. Also free. The garden was too far advanced for her to damage it. The door of the neat wire [Pg 222] inclosure was left open for her to go and come at will. There was danger of foxes at night, but we did not shut it. The foxes, however, did not come. Even foxes have to draw the line somewhere. That venerable old lady wandered about the place, pecking and contentedly singing, and in that part we really became fond of her. I think she died at last of old age.

II

I planted some canterbury-bells

I believe our agriculture may be said to have been successful. William was a faithful gardener. His corn, beans, pease, and potatoes were abundant, and all the other good things, whether to eat boiled, raw, or roasted. Our table was almost embarrassed by these riches, which perhaps helped us to weaken on the chicken idea.

I think our favorite staple was corn—green sweet corn, carried directly from the patch to the pot, and from the pot to the table. If you have not eaten it under these conditions you have never really known what [Pg 223] green corn should be like. The flavor of corn begins to go the moment it is pulled from the stalk, also the moment it leaves the pot. Cooked instanter, buttered, with salt and pepper, eaten the moment it does not blister your mouth, it is the pride of the garden. Cooked the next day and eaten when it has become cool and flabby, it becomes a reproach. It is different with beans. Beans keep, and, hot or cold or warmed over, they are never to be despised. The heaping platters of corn and the bowls of beans that our family could destroy after a morning of hearty exercise were rather staggering. Then presently the cantaloups came—fragrant, juicy ones, and all the salads, and—oh, well, never mind the list—I have heard of living like a lord, but I can't imagine any lord ever living as near to the sap and savor of life's luxuries as we did.

I must not overlook our rye. By June it was a cloth of gold, and of such elevation that I could barely see over it. There is something stately and wonderful about standing rye, when one is close enough to see [Pg 224] the individual stalks. They are so tall and slim that you cannot understand why the lightest wind does not lay them flat. Yet all day long they sway and ripple and billow in the summer wind, and unless the heavy, driving storm comes the ranks remain unbroken to the last and face the sickle in golden dress parade.

Westbury came with a force of men one blazing morning, and the sound of the cutting-machine was a music that carried me back to days when I had followed the reaper in the Mississippi Valley, from the first ray of sunrise to the last ray of sunset, eaten five times a day, drunk water out of a jug under the shock, and once picked up a bundle with a snake in it and jumped fourteen feet, more or less, straight up in the air. It was not that I was afraid, you understand, but just surprised. Snakes nearly always surprise me. I remember once when I was a little boy, on the way to visit a friend about my size, I took a short cut across a little clearing, and was hopping and singing along when I hopped onto something firm that moved twistingly under my [Pg 225] bare foot. I did not jump or run that time; I merely opened out my wings and flew. Corn-rows, brush-piles, fences, were as nothing. I sailed over them like a gnat till I reached the big main road. I was not interested in short cuts, after that, and I didn't cross that field again for

years. I was not afraid, but I did not wish to be surprised again. I recall another time—

But this is not a snake story. I told Westbury that I could bind as well as ever, and would give them an exhibition of a few rounds. But it was impressively hot and at about the third bundle I remembered an important memorandum I wanted to make, and excused myself. It was quite pleasant in my study, and I kept on making memorandums until by and by Westbury sent the Hope to tell me that they'd like me to come out and give the rest of the exhibition. It was not very considerate of Westbury when I was busy that way, and I ignored his suggestion.

We did not go in for selling seed rye, as I had once contemplated, but I think we might have done so if there had been a demand. Westbury and the men put it into the barn, and later flailed it out on the barn floor, after the manner of Abraham and Boaz and Bildad the Shuhite, beating the flails in time and singing a song that Bildad himself composed. Who would have a dusty, roaring thrashing-machine when one can listen to the beating flails and be back with Boaz and Bildad in the days when the world was new?

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Just a word more of our vegetable experiments. For one thing, our asparagus-bed thrived. Those hot mornings I put in paid the biggest return of any early-morning investment I ever made. Each year it came better and better—in May and June we could not keep up with it and shared it with our neighbors. The farm-dweller who does not plant an asparagus-bed as quickly as he can get the ground ready, and the plants for it, makes a grave mistake.

Perhaps I ought to record here that our sweet-potatoes were a success. We were told that they would not grow in New England, but they grew for us and were sweet and plentiful.

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The waning of the year in a garden is almost the best of it, I think. Spring with its thrill of promise, summer with its fulfilment—meager or abundant, according to the season—are over. Then comes September and October, the season of cool, even brisk, mornings and mellow afternoons. It is remnant-day in the garden, the time to take a basket and go bargain-hunting on the "as is" counter. Where the carrots have been gathered there are always a few to be found, if one looks carefully, and in the melon-patch there is sure to be one or two that still hold the bouquet of summer, with something added that has come with the first spicy mornings of fall. Also, if one is lucky, he will find along the yellowing rows a few ears of corn, tender enough and sweet enough for the table, with not quite the flavor of July, perhaps, but with something that appeals as much to the imagination, that belongs with the spectral sunlight, the fading stalks and vines, and carries the memory back to that first day of April planting. To bring in a basket, however scanty, of those odds and ends and range

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them side by side on the kitchen table affords a gratification that is not entirely material, I believe, for there is a sort of pensive sadness in it that I have been told is related to poetry.

I have said little of our flowers, but they were a large part—sometimes I think the largest part—of our happiness. Going back through the summers now, I cannot quite separate those of that first year from those of the summers that followed. It does not matter; sooner or later we had all the old-fashioned things: hollyhocks in clusters and corners, and on the high ground in a long row against the sky; poppies and bleeding-heart, columbine and foxglove, bunches of crimson bee-balm and rows of tall delphinium in marvelous shades of blue. And we had banks of calliopsis and sunflowers—the small sunflowers of Kansas, that bloom a hundred or more to a stalk—and tall phlox whose fragrance carries one back to some far, forgotten childhood. Then there were the roses—the tea-roses that one must be careful of in winter and the hardy climbers—the Dorothy Perkins and ramblers clambering over the walls. As I look back now through the summers I seem to see a tangle of color stretching across the years. It is our garden—our flowers—always a riot of disorder, always a care and a trial, always beloved and glorious.

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One year I planted some canterbury-bells—the blue and the white. They are biennials, and bloom the second year. The blue ones came wonderfully, but the white ones apparently failed. I did not plant them again, for I went in mainly for perennials that, once established, come year after year. I tried myosotis, too, but that also disappeared after the second year. Our garden, such as it was, was a hardy garden, where only the fittest survived.

There was an accompaniment to our garden. It was the brook. Nearly always, as I dug and planted, I could hear its voice. Sometimes it rose strong and insistent—in spring, when rains were plenty; sometimes in August when the sky for weeks had been hard and dry, it sank to a low murmur, but it was seldom silent. All the year through its voice was a lilting undertone, and the seasons ran away to the thread of its silver song.

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After all, a garden in any season is whatever it seems to its owner. To one who plans and plants it, tends and loves it, any garden is a world in little, a small realm of sentient personalities, of quaint and lovely associations, of anxious strivings and concerns, of battles, of triumphs, and of defeats. To one who makes a garden under compulsion it is merely an inclosure of dirt and persistent weeds, a place of sun and sweat and some more or less perverse and reluctant vegetables that would be much more pleasantly obtained from the market-wagon. There is no personality in it to him, nor any poetry. I know this, because I was once that kind of a gardener myself. It was when I was a boy and had to hoe one every Saturday forenoon, when there were a number of other things I wanted to do. It was almost

impossible to study lovingly the miracle of the garden when duty was calling me to play short-stop on the baseball nine that I knew was assembling on the common, with some irresponsible one-gallus substitute in my place. Yet even in those days I loved the fall garden. The hoeing was all done then, the weeds were no longer my enemies. One could dig around among them and find a belated melon, and in the mellow sunlight, between faded corn-rows, scoop out its golden or ruby heart and reflect on many things.

III

And how the family did grow up!

As I look back now, that first year on our abandoned farm seems a good deal like the years that followed it; but it could not have been so, for when I consider to-day's aspect and circumstance I realize that each of our twelve years of ownership furnished events that were to us unusual, some of them, at the time, even startling.

We must have enjoyed a kind of prosperity, I suppose, for we seem always to have been planning or doing something to enlarge the house or improve its surroundings, and quite a good deal of money can be spent in that way. I think it was about the second year that for the sake of light and air we let out three dormer windows on the long roof, and I remember that in order not to make a mistake in their architecture we drove thirty miles one morning to see a house like ours which had owned its windows from the beginning. We loved our old house, you see, and did not wish to do it an injury. I think it was about the same time that we pulled off the plaster from the living-room ceiling and left the exposed beams—old hewn timbers which we tinted down with a dull stain. William Deegan and I stained those beams together, and our friendship ripened during that employment. William had been with us about a year at this period—not steadily, because now and then would come a day when with sadness and averted eyes he would say, "I think I'll be goin' now, for a little while," after which the effacement of William for perhaps a week, followed by his return some morning, pale, delapidated, as on the morning of his first arrival.

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In the beginning I had argued, even remonstrated, but without effect. William only said, humbly: "It comes over me to be goin', and I have to do it. I'll be dacent ag'in, whin I get back."

During one such period of absence there came a telephone call from the sheriff of the nearest town of size.

"Do you know a man named William Deegan?"

"We do."

"He is in the calaboose here. His fine and costs amount to five dollars. Do you want to redeem him?"

"We do."

Clearly William's vacation had been unusual, even for him. We sent up the money and William was home that night, more crushed, more pale, more dilapidated than ever. He had worn a new suit away. He returned with a mere rag. We thought this might cure him, but nothing could do that. We could redeem William, but he could not redeem himself. These occasional lapses were the only drawback of that faithful, industrious soul, and we let them go. We had been unable to

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forgive them in the light-headed, literary Gibbs.

But William here is a digression; I was speaking of our improvements. We decided one year that we must have more flowers —a real garden. We made it on the side of the house where before had been open field—walled in a space where there was an apple-tree, a place large enough to assemble all the things we loved most and that grew with an economy of care. In a little while it was a glorious tangle that we admired exceedingly, and that our artist friends tried to paint.

Another year we converted my study behind the chimney into a pantry, opened it into the kitchen, made the "best room" into a dining-room, and left the long living-room with the big fireplace for library use only. That was a radical change and I had to build me a study over on a cedar slope —a good deal of a house, in fact, where I could gather my traps about me, for with the years my work had somehow invited a paraphernalia of shelves and files, and a variety of other furniture that required room. It was better for a growing-up family, too. With me out of the house, they had more freedom to grow up in, which, after all, was their human right, and the growing-up machinery could revolve as noisily as it pleased without furnishing a procrastinating author an added excuse for not working. No author with a growing-up family should work in his own home. He is impossible enough under even the best conditions.

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And how the family did grow up. Why, once when they were home from school I came from the study one day to find a young man in the house—a strange young man, from somewhere in the school neighborhood. I couldn't imagine what he was doing there until I was taken aside and it was explained to me that he was there to see our eldest, the Pride. That little girl, imagine! It is true she was eighteen—I counted, up on my fingers to see—but the Pride! why, only yesterday she was bare-footed, wading in the brook. Somehow I couldn't make it seem right.

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IV

And then one eventful day

I suppose it was about that time that we acquired a car—it would be likely to be about that time. 'Most everybody was getting cars, and Lord Beaconsfield, good Old Beek, was getting slower each year and could no longer keep up even with our deliberate progress. Furthermore, I learned to drive the car, in time. It is true I knocked some splinters from the barn, put a crimp in a mud-guard, and smashed another man's tail-light in the process, but nothing fatal occurred, though I found it a pretty good plan to stick fairly close to my new study on the cedar slope if I wanted to keep up with the garage and damage bills. Those bills startled me, at first, and then, like everybody else, I became callous and reckless, and we did without a good many other things in order that the car might not go unshod or climb limpingly the stiff New England hills.

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And then at last, one eventful day—a day far back in that happy, halcyon age when ships sailed as freely across the ocean as ferry-boats across the North River and men roved at will among the nations of the earth—one sunny August morning, eight years after the day of our coming, we locked the old house behind us and drove away in the car to a New York pier and sailed with it (the car, I mean, not the pier) to the Mediterranean, and the shores of France. In that fair land, while the world was still at peace, we wandered for more than a year, resting where we chose, as long as we chose, all the more unhurried and happy for not knowing that we were seeing the end of the Golden Age. Oh, those lovely days when we went gipsying along the roads of Provence and Picardy and Touraine! I cannot write of them now, for in to-day's shock of battle they have already become unreal and dreamlike. I touch them and the bloom vanishes. But sometimes when I do not try to write, and only lean back and close my eyes, I can catch again a little of their breath and sweetness; I can see the purpling vineyards and the poppied fields; I can drift once more with Elizabeth and our girls through the wonderland of France.

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It was on a winter evening that I drove our car back to its old place in the barn, after its long journeyings by land and sea

War came and brought the ruin of the world. It was late in the year when we returned to America, and it was on a winter evening that I drove our car back to its old place in the barn, after its long journeyings by land and sea. Our old house had remained faithful. A fire roaring up the chimney made it home.

We went to Westbury's, however, for the holidays. Westbury with the years had become a prosperous contractor, for Brook Ridge was no longer an abandoned land, but a place of new and beautiful homes. Westbury's prosperity, however, had not made him proud—not too proud to offer us old-time Christmas hospitality at his glowing fireside.

V

Was it the spirit of our garden?

Summer found us back in the old house, almost as if we had not left it. Almost, but not quite. Somehow the world had changed. Perhaps it was just the war—perhaps it was because we were all older—our girls beginning to have lives of their own—because the family unit was getting ready to dissolve.

The dissolving began at last one sunny June day when the Pride left us. It was the young man whom I had noticed around the house a year or two before who took her away. She seemed to prefer to go with him than to stay with us, I could not exactly make out why, but I did not think it best, or safe, to argue the question, and I drove them to the train afterward.

Then the Hope and the Joy got the notion of spending their summers in one of those camps that are so much the fashion now, and at last there came a day that the Hope, who such a little while ago was running care-free and happy-hearted in the sun, bade us good-by and sailed away—sailed back across the ocean to France, an enlisted soldier, to do her part where the world's bravest were battling for the world's freedom. [Pg 240]

For us, indeed, the world had changed; we had little need any more for the old house that on a July day twelve years before we had found and made our home. It had seen our brief generation pass; it was ready for the next. And when, one day, there came a young man and his bride, just starting on the way we had come, and seeing the beauty of the spot, just as we had seen it, wanted to own and enjoy it, just as we had owned and enjoyed it, we yielded it to them gladly, even if sorrowfully, for one must give up everything, some time or other, and it is an economy of regret to give to the right person, at the right time.

And now just here I want to record a curious thing. Earlier in these pages I have spoken of planting one year some white canterbury-bells that did not grow, or at least, so far as we could discover, did not bloom. In six seasons we never saw any sign of them, yet on the day we were leaving our house, closing it for the last time, I found on the spot where they had been planted, in full [Pg 241]

bloom, a stalk of white canterbury-bells! Had the seed germinated after all those years? Was it the spirit of our garden, sprung up there to tell us good-by? Who can answer?

Our abandoned farm is no longer ours. We, too, have abandoned it. Only the years that we spent there remain to us—a tender and beautiful memory. Whatever there was of shadow or misfortune has long since passed, by. I see now all our summers there bathed in mellow sunlight, all the autumns aglow with red and gold, all the winters clean with sparkling snow, all the springs green with breaking buds and white with bloom. If those seasons were not flawless at the time, they have become so, now when they are added to the past.

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And I know that they were indeed happy, for they make my heart ache remembering, and it is happiness, and not misery, that makes the heart ache—when it is gone.

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