

Paine Albert Bigelow

Dwellers in Arcady: The Story of an Abandoned Farm



Albert Paine

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Dwellers in Arcady: The Story of an Abandoned Farm

CHAPTER ONE

I

All my life I had dreamed of owning a brook

Just 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 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 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 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.

"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 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.

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.

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. 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 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 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 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 small ones. Also, to a tiny one which in our dream we promptly converted into a bathroom. 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."

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.

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 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.

"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.

"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."

"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.

Whatever there was to know about Brook Ridge, Westbury knew – an all-wise 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 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 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 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 briars and brush and poison ivy. He was a savage worker. The thorns stung him to a pitch of fighting 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.

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.

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."

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

CHAPTER TWO

I

We carried down a little hair trunk

I 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.

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.

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.

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 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 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.

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.

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.

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.

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."

"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.

"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 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.

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. '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.

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.

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.

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.

'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.

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.

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.

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.

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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