

DOOLITTLE'S COUNTRY HOME

By William Wallace Whitelock

IN the manner of his kind, Clarence Doolittle rode his hobbies to death. When starting bee-culture, he declared that bees were like other animals, and hence amenable to man's mental control, and that this thing of handling them with gloves and a mask was all nonsense.

"I will prove to you that I am right!" he cried, advancing boldly and unguarded to the hive. "Now watch me." We watched him, and thereafter he was especially sensitive to the statement that if you looked a bee steadily in the eye without winking he would not hurt you.

Again in his attempt at bullfrog farming, no sooner had Clad got his polliwogs safely through the trying ordeal of leg-cutting than he bought a lot of Muscovy ducks and introduced them into the waters of the frog-pond. Thereupon the batrachians mysteriously disappeared; but when the day of reckoning came for the ducks an unusual flavor of spring chicken was noticeable in their flesh.

Clad's enthusiasm, however, was inexhaustible, and the following summer he decided to establish a country home for himself and his poor, long-suffering, gentle wife.

"There is no place for a man like the country!" he cried, in announcing his intention. "There he belongs, near to Nature's heart, near to the heart of the great mother, who nourishes him for the asking and refreshes him with the scent of flowers and the songs of nightingales."

As Clad's customary abode was New-York city, the nightingales seemed a little out of latitude. But undaunted by the disparagement of friends and relatives, he proceeded to buy himself a vacant lot six miles from the city and a mile from the nearest trolley-line, in order, as he said, that he might enjoy the walk morning and evening. Well, he got his walk, but on rainy days he was a sight to behold. Fortunately, pressure of business prevented him from designing his own house, and accordingly in due time a pretty little cottage appeared on the vacant lot. Not in several weeks, however, was I privileged to see either land or cottage. He wished, he said, to defer my visit until the trees and crops he intended planting should have got well under way. His ideas in regard both to agriculture and horticulture were somewhat misty.

"I tell you," he said, "when a man can point to a forest giant and say: 'There, I planted that!' he feels as though he himself had taken root in the earth. What I wanted to consult you about, however, was the best kinds of trees to plant. Of course I can walk over into the woods and get all the acorns I need; but I don't want all oaks. They take up too much room."

"That's true," I said, "although they possess the undisputed advantage of being such quick growers. But haven't you thought of any other kinds yourself?"

"Ye-es, I've got down maples and arbor-vitae. I thought they'd look unique with those great balls hanging on them."

I gasped—did he think ten-pin balls grew on trees?

"Besides," I ventured, "you can sell them to bowling-alleys."

"Why, so I can! I can make a lot of money that way. That's a great idea, old fellow! But, I say, can't you suggest some other kinds of seeds still?"

"Well, let me see, have you got down whiffletrees?"

"No, I never heard of them. Would they suit, do you think?"

"Just the thing. But since you're going in for arbor-vitae, you ought also to have arbor sapientiae. You'll need it badly before you get through; but I much fear you'll experience trouble in getting it."

Clad was not a Latin scholar, so I felt safe. He got me to spell out the name

of the "tree of wisdom," in order, as he said, that he might make no mistake in ordering it.

The real object of his visit, however, was to get me to go out to his country home with him; so an hour later we were trudging across the mile of country between the trolley-line and "Heart's-ease," as he had christened his estate. I was already familiar with the lay-out of the land, from an elaborate polychrome map of the place—otherwise I should never have been able to make my way through the labyrinth of variegated weeds which blocked the passage to the house and which were recognizable as vegetables only by the hordes of potato-bugs and other parasites swarming over them.

"I suppose you're not buying anything except meat now for the table?" I asked, as we carefully picked our way through the labyrinth.

"We-ell," he replied hesitatingly, "not exactly. So far I've got only one turnip and two onions from the garden. But I have four parsnips coming on. I had five asparagus heads, but the chickens ate them up. Somehow, I can't keep those miserable chickens out of the garden, although I've cut their wings. Still they fly over the fence."

"But are you certain you have cut their wings in the right way?" I asked, with premonition of his reply.

"Yes, I'm certain; I did it myself. I cut both their wings carefully."

Fortunately at this moment we reached the house, or I much fear that at last I should have told Clad what I thought of his intellect. Mrs. Doolittle appeared on the veranda, dressed in white and appearing as fresh and pretty as a spray of apple-blossom and as sadly out of keeping with her surroundings. I took her hand and looked into her eyes, and she gave a spasmodic effort to bid me welcome to "Heart's-ease"—which I then and there christened "Heartbreak"—but she made a dismal failure of it. A fresh misfortune, it seems, had occurred. The three ears of corn upon which Clad had counted to enrich the evening meal had been stolen by a passing tramp, who, moreover, had threatened to report them for keeping a disorderly place. Clad said little, but it was plain that the blow was a heavy one. Just then a clucking hen came around the house followed by an immense brood of awkward, long-legged chickens.

"For mercy's sake, Clad!" I cried,

"where did you get all those roosters?" "Henry," he replied solemnly, "I set that miserable hen with fourteen eggs, and do you know thirteen of them turned out roosters?"

This was too much, and I broke down and laughed. But I laughed alone—Clad and his wife were beyond laughter. The announcement of dinner at this point was doubly welcome.

From the culinary point of view the meal was a success, as, with the exception of one tomato, nothing on the table was indigenous to the soil of "Heartbreak." To my infinite relief, the plate bearing this precious morsel, which was evidently intended for my delectation, slipped from the hands of the waitress at the critical moment, and I was spared the ordeal of eating it. Clad's disappointment was pitiful—he had so counted on my enjoying that tomato. Later, when no one was watching, I slipped a dollar into the hand of the waitress.

After dinner Mrs. Doolittle, who seemed strangely ill at ease, proposed a walk up the road to see the sunset. From the point where we stood on gaining our destination, "Heartbreak" was not visible, and for sometime we lingered, watching the change of cloud effect. On turning to return to the house, we suddenly became aware of an unusual illumination of the eastern sky, about which Clad, of course, immediately began to formulate the most far-fetched theories. But suddenly with a gasp he came to a standstill.

"Henrietta," he cried, in a strained voice, "that's a fire!"

There was only one house in that direction—"Heartbreak."

"Come along!" he cried, and he broke into a run, leaving us to follow.

On gaining the turn of the road which brought "Heartbreak" into view, I saw that Clad was right—the house was enveloped in flames from roof to cellar. It was doomed.

At the front gate we came upon Clad and the servants, watching the conflagration. A strange expression was on his face. What were his emotions? On the fence near him sat the hen and her thirteen roosters, blinking vigorously in the flickering light. For awhile Clad remained silent. "Henrietta," he said at last, "it must have been the incubator that set the house afire."

"Yes," she replied, striving to hide the joy in her voice, "it must have been the incubator. Oh, Mr. Sherman, what a glorious invention incubators are!"



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