Trees: Comrades of the Road

By Minnie Louise Raul
(Formerly Illinois L. Ruel)

Elm at the birthplace of Daniel Chester French, Exeter, N. H.

AT 34 COURT STREET, Exeter, N. H., a lovely old farmhouse of New England architecture rests in the shade of many graceful elms. On a bronze tablet on the front of this many-windowed, green-shuttered old mansion I found engraved—

"The Birthplace of the Sculptor Daniel Chester French—April 20, 1850."

In the garden stood the mightiest elm I had ever seen. It cast long, lacy shadows over the driveway and the spacious house. A tall, wide-spreading tree, it was symmetrically vase-shaped with slender limbs and drooping twigs. The full-topped luxuriant foliage hung willow fashion, one spray overlapping another, forming a leaf mosaic of beauty as it caught the sunlight. The rough furrowed bark which covered the huge trunk of this unlikable tree became smoother as the branches reached far upward and then spread out plume-like in feathery spray.

The citizens of the town are fond of this patriarchal elm that sheltered the early home where their beloved Daniel Chester French had spent his boyhood days. A nearby neighbor, a tall and slender courtly gentleman of the old school of the North and a friend of the sculptor's family, informed me that the great tree was more than 300 years old. He inquired as to whether I had seen the superb piece of sculpture that had been erected in the public square, the Exeter War Memorial, a work of their favorite native son.

The local judge, one of Exeter's oldest citizens, was proud of the town with its clean shady street, bordered with lovely elms interweaving overhead and casting dancing shadows. The village streets were lined with white picket fences and friendly gates. Having lived so many years in this quaint New England town, with its white church towers and many marks of yesteryears, where the curfew still rings at 9 o'clock in the evening, he knew its history and told us many interesting and intimate stories and anecdotes about the men who built it.

Daniel Chester French, reared in an atmosphere of love and culture, dignity and beauty favorable to the development of a sensitive poetic nature, became one of America's foremost sculptors. His neighbors and friends were the Lowells, Abbotts, Emmersons, Longfellow, the Daniel Websters and Whitthers. Perhaps it was from this association with these minds that the heads in his sculptured works received their striking fineneses. His ideals were the highest and best; he was American to the core. Among his hundred or more pieces of sculpture are "The Minute Man" at Concord, Mass.; the colossal statue of Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial and the bronze group at Gallaudet College portraying Dr. T. H. Gallaudet and his first deaf mute pupil.

Henry Flagg French, the father of this great American sculptor, was a New England judge, who later became Assistant Secretary of the Treasury. He, too, loved the town and was not only instrumental in the planting of the elms on the streets of Exeter, but was founder of the public library there.

Mrs. Daniel Chester French, in her book, "Memories of a Sculptor's Wife," tells about Daniel's first attempt—which showed his talent. He and his young friends were seated around the fireplace one evening eating raw turnips when he with his penknife carved a frog garbed in a frock coat. He called it "The Frog That Would A Courtin Go." When his mother, Anne Richardson French, a rare and sympathetic soul, saw it she exclaimed, "Dan, that is your career."

As I sketched this rugged and most beautiful of elms, I thought of the wholesome life of the New Englander as he lived it a hundred years ago.

IN GERMANY, Sgt. Bob Walker found the picture of Woodbury-beautiful Lauta Avrett, Sweetheart of the Old Gray Bonnet Regiment. Three years later, the picture still in his wallet, Bob returned to Ashburn, Georgia. And there, at a neighborhood party, he met the "Gray Bonnet Girl" herself! Soon she became his lovely Woodbury Bride!

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