

Family Album Glimpses



Album Glimpses

The South Side of the House—The Usserys

Our grandparents, with their medium to large sized families, generously provided us with uncles and aunts of various types and temperaments, and indirectly with a goodly number of cousins.

Those were truly memorable days when Aunt Beulah, of the Ussery clan, made for us those beautiful batches of caramel candy. She always began that candy by burning sugar in a heavy iron skillet, then dissolving that melted sugar in cream—no short cuts and no short-comings in Aunt Beulah's candy-making.

Many people thought that Aunt Beulah was pretty. Others liked her clear, rippling, musical laughter, but the thing that I remember best about her was the loveliness of her snow white, waxy hands. They were as nearly perfect as those of the lady

on the monument in the cemetery, and no less white. One of the most vivid pictures that hangs on the wall of my childhood memories is that of Aunt Beulah's graceful marble-like hands, pouring a golden wealth of caramel candy on Grandma Ussery's marble biscuit board.

Aunt Beulah's hands were often busy with other impressive activities. I have watched them holding a small brush, painting pictures on jars, glasses, plates, wooden plaques, and wooden trays—such as the ones that sausages came in. I remember watching her hands busy embroidering a turkey-red felt lambrequin with variegated yarn. And I remember them, too, turning, cutting, and tediously shaping crepe paper into flowers—carnations, tulips, but mostly lilies. Her hands were lovely with the lilies.

Aunt Beulah, as I remember, seemed always a good person to be about. In addition to her fair skin, her glossy black hair, her ringing laughter, her dancing eyes, and her beautiful hands, she carried with her a fragrance similar to that of the little rubber-bulbed perfume atomizer on her bureau.

I was not regularly a meddler, for Grandma Ussery had told me over and over again what a terrible thing happened once to a little girl named Meddlesome Matilda (Mattie, for short). She had opened her grandmother's snuff box and smelled it! No, I wasn't regularly a meddler, but somehow I never could pass through Aunt Beulah's room without squeezing that little squirt-gun bulb of the atomizer. Even at the risk of punishment

worse than scolding, I would have done so. It seemed to make me and the room and the whole world smell like Aunt Beulah.

There was another aunt of the Ussery blood who had been married since before I could first remember, and she was living up town in a lovely big house. I used to delight in visiting Aunt Agnes. Everything was always so “just so” and so exactly right at her house; yet it seemed to require little effort on her part to keep things that way.

For example, she had sliding doors between her front parlor and her sitting room, and sliding doors were very proper and up-to-date then. She had also a parlor lamp that had brass filigree work around the bottom, and she had a marble topped brass pedestal for the lamp to sit on.

She had large pink roses scattered over her green velvety parlor carpet, and she didn't seem the least bit afraid that her carpet would fade. In fact, she dared to keep her parlor shades halfway up—the only person I knew who did that—and she kept her parlor door open even on week days and when she didn't have company. That matter of raised shades and open parlor door made Aunt Agnes seem different in my estimation from everybody else I knew. Then, too, she bought the first piano in the neighborhood; that set her apart from all other women.

Aunt Agnes had in her sitting room-bedroom a rich-looking bright red and dark red carpet stretched over the floor. She had more straw under her carpets than did anyone else in

the whole family connection unless it was Grandma Jones in her parlor. Aunt Agnes's dresser, too, was different from all the others in the family. The mirror was very large, and the primping part was so low that I could see myself comb my hair without standing on a stool. This seemed the height of convenience and luxury.



Button! Button!

I liked spending the night at Aunt Agnes's house, for she let me have the whole big front upstairs room to myself, and she let me sleep in her folding bed—what a promotion from the mere trundle bed I had at home!

Aunt Agnes had time to sit down and talk to me just as though I were another grown-up. She had time, too, to tell me things I didn't know, things that were interesting and important. She always was offering me good things to eat. She seemed continually to have cake in her china closet. She offered me a choice of white or dark meat when I had no idea which to choose.

One Sunday dinner Aunt Agnes though didn't have "white meat or dark meat." She had fish! A whole baked fish all on the table at one time! It was a big fish with slices of lemon all around it and sprigs of green stuff, which I know now was parsley.

To one who's former experience had been limited to tinned sardines and salmon, this seemed monstrous.

Both Aunt Agnes and her husband, Uncle George, liked to see little girls eat, and I liked to oblige them. They had a wonderful cook named Minnie. She was so smart that she mopped the kitchen floor every day after dinner, every day, mind you, not just on Saturdays nor twice a week. She mopped that floor after dinner every day, even on Sundays and in the winter time. I greatly admired Minnie's mopping and her muffins.

Aunt Agnes had much of Grandma Ussery's properness and up-to-dateness about her, and she had a much better opportunity for exercising and indulging those qualities than did her mother. I won't say that she worked harder at being proper and up-to-date than did Grandma, but she seemed to get more impressive results.

Furthermore, she dressed me in one of her own nightgowns, one that had buttons all the way down the front from collar to hem—with never a button missing. As Aunt Agnes was a tall woman, that gave me a long and more or less graceful train—which I tried, when alone, to handle like a lady. I also had dozens of buttons, to do and undo and to count “rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief.” Never before nor since have I had so many buttons, so much train, nor felt so dressed up as in Aunt Agnes's nightgown.



Aunt Agnes was considerate, definite, and very, very firm. She was horribly shocked one day to see me chewing a wad of gum when we chanced to meet on the street. I feared her so much that I threw away the gum before I had chewed even half the sweet out of it.



Big Black Box

How early does a child begin to remember? I can answer only for myself. I was two years old in June before Uncle Gillie, my father's only brother, was killed in February of the next year. But some things I remember—just snatches, I admit—about that loved and indulgent uncle, as clearly as if they had happened this morning.

I can remember being with him and Grandma Ussery in Grandma's garden. There was a grape arbor up the middle of

the garden with herbs, calamus, mint, garlic, and such, on each side between and under the vines. I had always before walked along beside the herbs, but on this occasion, just as we got inside the gate and after Uncle Gillie had fastened it, he picked me up and set me on his shoulder. In this way we all went up the grape arbor. It seemed so funny to me to look down at the grape vines instead of up at them. I had never before known how an arbor looked on top.

We walked the full length of the arbor and on to the very small vine at the farthest end and on the left. That vine, it seemed, was the one we came to see. It was loaded with bunches of pinkish-purple grapes, and they seemed so large. It seemed funny to me that the littlest vine—this one was not more than waist high to Uncle Gillie—should have the biggest grapes. Another thing that seemed funny was the name of the vine. Grandma told Uncle Gillie that it was “Lutie.” That seemed such an odd name compared with plain old “Concord.” Uncle Gillie pulled the grapes off one by one and handed them up to me. I remember how good they were, and how important I felt to be so high.

Again, I remember sitting on Uncle Gillie’s knee at the left of the fireplace in Grandma’s room. The weather was cold, and he seemed to be warming my hands and feet; at any rate, he took off my shoes. Grandma was on the other side of the fire with some needlework, darning, I think, or knitting. I remember a dark, gray sock-like-looking something in her hand.

I remember, too, at another time seeing Uncle Gillie standing at the back door. He was looking down at me and smiling. I remember how tall and big he seemed, and I remember especially his dark mustache and tie against his white face and white shirt.

Then there was the day someone held me up to see him in the long black box. I remember how white his collar and forehead were, and how dark his mustache and his hair. That must have been in early February, 1898, as that was when he was killed in a railroad accident. I was three years old the following June.



My Richest Poor Relation

There was another aunt on the Ussery side of the house who was always referred to as “poor Molly.” Why the word “poor” was used with Aunt Molly’s name was more than I could understand; for it seemed to me that she had a great many things the others hadn’t. True, she had no husband. She had been a widow for years, but her other possessions made me think her the richest relative I had.

Take children, for instance: Aunt Molly had a good-sized flock of bright and healthy sons and daughters and they seemed the most fun of any cousins I had. Every member of the family had a keen sense of humor. When their jokes and laughter were turned loose at the table, in the cornfield, or around the

fire on winter evenings, hardly a minstrel show could surpass them. Yes, Aunt Molly was rich in sons and daughters, and their laughter.

And then, Aunty Molly had Old Ned, and she could drive him and her rickety old buggy to and from town along the tree-shaded country road that had wild flowers blooming on either side. This seemed to me a rare and incomparable privilege.

Aunt Molly also had a farm. True, it was not a very productive farm, but it had a high hill on the far side with a chestnut tree on the very top, and from that hill one could look down on the neighboring farms for miles around. And down both sides of the hill were ditches deep with high crumbly clay banks. Those banks were more fun to slide down than any cellar door I ever saw. But I got such warm and thorough hairbrush applications from Mama for what that clay did to my petticoats—and such—that I haven't cared for ditches since.

And Aunt Molly had a Mortgage. It wasn't mentioned often, and for a long time I couldn't imagine what a Mortgage was. It seemed in the class with chickenpox and dirty hands—something uncomfortable and something that should be hidden. Years later when I had accumulated some experiences with mortgages of my own I realized how Aunt Molly must have felt about hers. I realized, too, that Aunt Molly had a great many things that a mortgage couldn't cover.

Consider Mary, for instance. No mortgage, not even one of the tightest chattel variety, could hamper Mary. Mary, at Aunt

Molly's house, was not the "being" that had the lamb; Mary *was* the lamb. And what a lamb! She was pet and nuisance, joy and sorrow, of the farm.

Because Aunt Molly always kept a flock of sheep, and because in the flock there were always ewes who lacked a sense of motherly responsibility, there was always a Mary, either orphaned or disowned, to "baa" about the house.

Yes, to my childish delight there was a succession of Marys. How we distinguished these lambs one from another, if we did, I don't know. We didn't call them Mary I, Mary II, Mary Belle, or anything like that. Each was just Mary. And as a playmate she was all one could desire.

Aunt Molly's sons and daughters were older than I, and usually were out at work somewhere on the farm. Aunt Molly also kept busy. That left Mary and me to our own entertainment; we had the run of the farm, fields, woods, and barnlot.

But there were some places where Mary wasn't permitted to go, even though I was. One was the parlor, where the organ and the album were. One was the front porch where Aunt Molly's geraniums bloomed. Those places were taboo to lambs; yet, contrariwise, those were the places Mary wanted most to be, especially if I was there—most especially the front porch. Mary seemed to like geraniums as much as Aunt Molly and I did, but in a different way.

There were hickory trees in Aunt Molly's barnlot and persimmons in her pasture. There were cedar trees, large ones,

around and over her pond, and those cedar trees had bluebirds. There was the old rock spring across the road and down-a-ways from Aunt Molly's house. That was where she got her water, except that which she caught in rainbarrels, used exclusively for "first suds" on washday Mondays.

There was the neighborhood school where Aunt Molly and her sons and daughters each in turn served as teacher. Next to the school was the little white church where her grandsons preached in later years as they moved on to minister to big city churches.

As Aunt Molly's was the nearest house to the church and school, it became more or less a community center. It was there the extra teacher boarded, when there was one; and there the Evangelist boarded when there was one; and there the visiting preacher spent the night. Aunt Molly was largely the community's heart and pulse, mother-confessor, and chief dependence.

Aunt Molly had neighbors, good whole-souled, neighborly, accommodating, borrowing, lending, visiting, country neighbors. They were not least among her riches.

Aunt Molly also had fruit trees, but especially apple trees. Somehow I always associated her with apple trees. She and they had so much in common. She loved them beyond compare. I remember standing with her one day beside a large and very beautiful tree in full fruit. She was saying, "I planted this tree myself when it was only a little switch."



One of the Best Things in Life is to Plant a Tree

Those were the words, and she said them very simply; but her tone of voice said to me that next to rearing a lovely daughter or stalwart son, one of the best things in life is to plant a switch or seed and to watch it week by week, year by year, grow into a beautiful and productive establishment.

Aunt Molly had an attic, just an unfinished attic. There were stored winter clothes in summer; summer clothes in winter; and old clothes at all times. That attic was an ideal place on a rainy day for “playing lady.” There was even a cracked and speckled mirror leaning against the studding, and in this a lady could view her finery from her high heels to her frayed ostrich plumes.

In the attic was where Aunt Molly stored her herbs, her dried peas and beans, and her garden seeds. They were hung in bags from the rafters. Up there were also her quilting frames, loom, reel, spinning wheel, and bags of wool and feathers. Anything that wasn’t in regular use, if it didn’t need to be stored in the cellar or smokehouse, was put away in the attic.

Aunt Molly had a better understanding of how to make and cut homemade bread than any other housewife my childhood

knew. That she was expert in baking bread there is no need of saying. All the people who traveled that road on Wednesdays and Saturdays knew by the aroma that Aunt Molly could bake good bread. But it was in cutting the bread that she excelled.

Her baking pan held five loaves crosswise. That made the loaves somewhat broader and shorter than the loaves we bought in town at the grocery. While her bread was still warm, Aunt Molly sliced it lengthwise, and buttered each slice to the outmost crust. They were not too thin, either, those slices. They were sturdy enough to stay whole when laid lengthwise in a child's two hands held with the tips of fingers touching (almost like a pack-saddle). They held a surprising amount of blackberry jam, grape preserves, honey, sugar-butter, molasses, or apple butter—the good thick kind made with spices and fresh cider!

And there were Aunt Molly's gardens, the large and somewhat rugged vegetable garden, and the small well-loved flower garden. Fences were expensive, and her chickens were Leghorns; so that meant a long walk across a field to the vegetable garden which to me seemed very large indeed, especially on a July day when I tried to help pull weeds out of a bean row that ran the entire length of the plot.

I thought the plot must also seem very large to Aunt Molly and to Alfred, the oldest boy who was twelve years old when his father died. Aunt Molly and Alfred and Old Ned did all the plowing both in the garden and in the fields. Old Ned pulled

the plow; Alfred pushed it, and Aunt Molly guided by walking ahead in the furrow leading the horse by the rein. Until Alfred and Ned were experienced enough to do the job by themselves, this was the way the family's food and clothing were earned, as well as the interest on the mortgage.

As I remember that vegetable garden of Aunt Molly's, I remember especially the cow-peas and peppers, perhaps because the peas were so plentiful and the peppers so pretty. Aunt Molly always stored bags and bags of dried peas in the attic for winter, and hung strings of red peppers and festoons of yellow popcorn on the kitchen walls.

I remember the sweet potatoes in that garden too. How their vines covered the ground five or six rows wide and the length of the whole garden. Their solid mass of green stood out in sharp contrast to the other vegetables that showed the thin brown earth between their rows.

That cloddy hillside garden might not have seemed productive to people accustomed to more fertile land, but by the use of labor, love, and barnyard fertilizer, Aunt Molly and her sons and daughters made it produce year-round food for themselves, and an extra amount for town relatives and country neighbors.



A Far-flung Garden

But the part and possession of Aunt Molly that was shared with the greatest number of neighbors, friends, and passers-by was her flower garden. The peculiar way in which the country road curved as it passed Aunt Molly's place left a triangular plot of rocky ground that hardly belonged to the road and scarcely belonged to the farm. This being a sort of no-man's land, you'd naturally expect a woman to take it over. That's exactly what Aunt Molly did. She made a brave effort at fencing the pigs and cows and chickens out, and prepared to plant flowers within.

The garden began in this way, she said: When her first baby had three-month colic, an old Negro woman, a neighbor named Nora Fox, brought her a bunch of catnip and set it out in the corner of the triangle nearest the house where it would be handy for making the baby's tea. Believing that a mother's soul needs treatment as well as a baby's tummy, Nora planted beside the catnip a flaming crimson double poppy.

When the poppy bloomed, the neighbors saw. Traveling then by horse or by horse and wagon, the flower-lovers stopped to admire and discuss and to ask for seeds of the bright blooming poppy.

In exchange they brought seeds, bulbs, cuttings, and plants from their own flower gardens. Thus, the roadside garden grew and spread. Every passer-by who had contributed to the garden continued to be interested in it.

In saving seeds for her own “start” each year, Aunt Molly always remembered other flower-lovers. One who visited her house in winter “to sit for a spell by the fire” would see her rise from her patchwork-cushioned rocker, and take from the mantel an ash-dusty shoebox filled with small packages of seeds wrapped in old envelopes and scraps of newspaper, tied with sewing thread and neatly labeled.

“These are seeds of Nora Fox’s double crimson Poppy,” she would say. “I want you to have some of them. Many times I have thought I had lost it, but always a stray plant shows up somewhere, perhaps in the fence corner, perhaps in the pigpen or chicken yard, or even out on the roadside, and I find it in time to save seeds for another year. The catnip is growing now, all over the place. It makes itself a weed, but I like it.

“These are seeds of Mary Nicholson’s marigolds. You must have some of them. These are Sackie Jones’s pink Zinnias. Here’s a new flower that Mrs. Felix Sowell gave me. Here’s a start of Anna Gray’s verbena.”

In this way flowers spread each year. Hers was indeed a far-flung garden.

In the matter of labor, Aunt Molly’s garden was always a no-man’s land. “Men don’t know flowers from weeds, or just don’t care,” she would say.

And so, as long as she could make her frail, tired body move, she worked her flower garden herself. There were many times when a weak back permitted her to do barely more than sit on

a stone and dig weeds with a butcher knife, but the thoughts of the flowers that would come when the weeds were gone, she said, kept her happy and hoping. Those thoughts and sunshine helped to heal both mind and body.

One afternoon, walking in the garden with Aunt Molly, I tried to count the number of plants and flowers and remember their names as she introduced them. Just inside the garden gate an oak tree sprang from an acorn that had sprouted in the lily bed. The gardener had spared, even cherished it, because, as she said, "Lilies do better with a little shade." There were several kinds of lilies in the bed; and next to them were a mass of four-o'clocks, baby slippers, feverfew, foxgloves, verbena, and mourning bride.

A black-eyed Susan was twining over a blanket flower, and climbing up a rustic trellis to join a spinsterish wisteria. This, Aunt Molly said, never bloomed. But she protected it forgivingly.

A bed of marigold, hardy sunflower, golden bell, and artichoke reminded one that all gold is not in mines and mints. Prince's feather and white and blue asters were about to hide the violets and dianthus underneath. Honeysuckles, woodbine, cosmos, and a yellow rambler rose were trying to outgrow a Jean Kerr dahlia which was tangled in their midst.

The things there were hanging on the next trellis I thought were dishrag gourds, but Aunt Molly declared that they were "the fruit of a new and rare foreign plant called "Bella Casa,"

and in their native country they are used for pickles and such.” I suspected she was quoting from the seed catalogue.

A volunteer asparagus plant and a yellow Texas rose stood in front of a hedge of lilacs. White and purple Jack beans were blooming in the mock orange and crepe myrtle bushes. Nearby was a clump of Angel’s Trumpets—that may be just a glorified “jimson” weed to some, but despite its common cousin in the pig pen, it is really a beautiful flower, especially when spoken of by the name Aunt Molly always used—Angel’s Trumpet.

Lavender petunias and yellow cannas made a pretty picture in the next rock-bordered bed. Two new hydrangea cuttings were getting a start under turned-over fruit jars, shaded by shingles with clods on top. There were a dozen or more varieties of cannas in the next bed, “A Popular Dollar Collection,” Aunt Molly quoted again. In the midst of them flourished a little rose bush with rich dark leaves and briar-covered stems. Aunt Molly said that some folks always called that the Jackson rose, after the old General; but she thought of it as the Harrison rose, because it had been given to her by Dr. and Mrs. Harrison.

There were bachelor buttons, gladioli, chrysanthemums, wild roses, sweet Williams, seven-steps-to-heaven, hibiscus, Shasta daisy, bridal wreath, lady finger, bear grass, cacti—each plant with a story of its own, one that Aunt Molly liked to repeat.

Many things were buried in that garden, mostly cares and worries. Many memories clung to the plants in the rocky little triangle. There was a bleeding heart near the gate whose story

she never told. There was a golden-leaf honeysuckle that made her eyes fill as she mentioned the daughter who planted it the year before pneumonia struck. There were other plants that had special significance, either as to the time of planting, or source, or person.

Floods covered the garden and droughts parched it, for it was low and founded upon a rock. Moles seemed most pestiferous, and calves, lambs, chickens, rabbits, field mice, bugs, mules, and stray billy goats—all liked that garden, sometimes to the point of exasperation for the gardener. But despite all those disasters, Aunt Molly's love and patience and ever-trying-again made the garden prosper year after year.

There is no measuring the spread of that garden. An editor in Washington wrote an editorial titled, "Memories of Miss Molly's Garden." A housewife in Texas cherishes a lily from there. Another in Oklahoma watches every year for her "Miss Molly" hyacinth to bloom. A pair of bereaved parents came each summer to get a bouquet from the garden for a little green mound. "Our child loved your garden so much," they would say.

When Nora Fox passed a flower on to a friend, she tossed a petal that started an avalanche of beauty, good cheer, and love. It may go on for a century or more.

Indeed I think that the aunt they called "poor Molly" was the richest relative I ever had. Certainly, despite much misfortune,

a meager income, and a heavy mortgage, she proved to be our family's greatest philanthropist.



The North Side of the House—The Joneses

On my mother's side of the house, of the good old practical Jones blood, we also had a variety of aunts and uncles.

PEACHES AND CREAM

There was the pretty aunt who, remarkable to say, was as lovely in disposition as in features, and her features were lovely indeed. Her skin was of the tint and richness of cream that came to the top on the crocks in Grandma Jones's milk house. Her cheeks were as pink as those of the peaches we brought in from the orchard—but they turned even pinker when they were mentioned. Her hair was a little darker than new molasses, and long, and just wavy enough. I used to enjoy watching her sit in the sun and comb it, or stand by the washbench and turn it white with soapsuds, then rinse, rub and sun it, and stand by the bureau and do it up.

This aunt had the most company and got the most letters of any member of the family. It was she who took care of the parlor, which was to be expected, for she used it the most. She had a great many beaux, some steady, some transient—she got three gold-headed silk umbrellas and two boxes of candy

one Christmas. All that, I thought, was too much for anyone woman, especially one who didn't like to walk in the rain or sun and didn't care for candy.

I never could discover what became of that candy. She didn't seem to eat it, and she didn't seem to pass it around. It just stayed out of sight, mysteriously and curiously. The umbrellas: I lay awake at night trying to figure how she would ever get the use of them all. I knew that, being a Jones, she would have to. Perhaps she finally did. Ladies had to be protected in those days, and umbrellas and hatpins each served two purposes.

It was this aunt, Aunt Daisy, who did most of the dainty jobs around the house. Whatever she did seemed dainty. She was the only person in the family who could peel potatoes, cut up cabbage, and wash the dishes with an air of grace and artistry.

There was the aunt who was always greeted with "Aunt Mamie, tell us a tale!" She could spin the grandest yarns and could make them seem so real that we would laugh or cry or shudder as the story suggested.

Those were truly a great part of the good times when we sat at evening on the doorsteps beside Aunt Mamie and heard about Red Riding Hood, Bluebeard, or the Three Bears.

I am sure we could all have listened to her telling of the Three Little Pigs, and of Goldilocks and the Three Bears ten times in succession. Another story we liked was "Beauty and the Beast." Aunt Mamie made that so perfect in detail that we could almost see the frightful beast, and the sisters whose eyes

were red from deliberate applications of onion juice. Secretly, I thought it took supreme courage to put onion juice in one's own eyes, no matter what the incentive.

There was another story also, about two men and a bushel, or was it a half bushel, measure? Anyway, it had glue smeared into the bottom of it. And there was a mother-in-law who was propped up in the buggy even after she was dead. The two men in the story were named Great Claus and Little Claus (or was it Claws, or Klaus?).

I remember only a few incidents of the story now, but it was one of our favorites then. Especially thrilling when Great Claus knocked over the dead mother-in-law and thought he was going to hang for killing her. There were a number of Aunt Mamie's tales that I never heard elsewhere and never saw in a story book. She herself didn't seem to know where she had found them. Perhaps, I'm thinking now, many of them "just grewed." We three children were, I am sure, eager and inspiring enough to make stories grow in the fertile mind of a hard-pressed story teller.

Another auburn-haired, pink-cheeked aunt, was one whom I regarded as chief among feather-bed artists. She could make up a big fat feather bed with the squarest edges and smoothest pillows of any other woman in the family. She took care of the upstairs at Grandma's house, made the beds, swept the matting floor coverings, and kept the clothes in order. All dresses were spread over a line stretched across the corner of

each bedroom and covered with a sheet to keep off dust and fading. Another thing I remember about her was that she saw to it that every member of the feminine part of the family put her hair-combings into the proper hair-receiver.

I looked forward to the day when all that hair would be untangled and made into switches. Saving combings was a proper practice in those days. That hair came in handy for “rats” and switches, which were used to bolster up the size of clubs, braids, or pompadours.

This aunt, like the older two, was married and taken away from home before I could remember a great deal about her as a member of Grandma’s household. I do remember visiting her in her Nashville home, however, the summer I was ten years old, and riding for the first time on a street car; and also, just previous to the street car ride, having my first strawberry soda! Excitement, strawberry soda, and a jostling street car ride on a hot June afternoon didn’t fit well together. I gave up the soda and to this day the very term, “strawberry soda,” makes me uncomfortable.

Of the older aunts I knew little except that they were industrious, that they were ladylike, and that they liked to make pretty things with their fingers. Articles of handicraft all about the house were credited to them. The what-not, and many of its ornaments, we owed to them. One was the poetry-loving Aunt Ada who kept the scrapbook. She was the aunt who

was “different.” I suppose every family has at least one who is different. But both those aunts had died before I was born.

And of the uncles: there was first the Great Bear—he really wasn’t so bearish as that may sound, but he was big and dark and hairy, and his voice was so heavy and his hair so bristly. I just used to play-like he was a bear.

Then there was the jolly, fattish uncle who would let us ride on his knee, his foot, or his back, according to how the notion struck us. His idea of fun was to romp with us on the floor or in the yard; or to catch and hold us and count our ribs with his stub of a thumb, and make us giggle and squirm and squeal—until, as he said, we “stole sugar.” He also taught us some of the grandest games, “I Spy,” “Fox and Goose,” “Poison Stick,” etc.

We adored the Jolly Uncle. We appreciated him even more in later years, and after we learned that he probably had more worries and heartaches than any other member of the family. But worries never showed in his face nor in his ways with us, as children.

Then there was the primped-up uncle. He was as handsome and as neat as the youngest aunt was pretty. He was kind and pleasant in disposition, but we children somehow always admired him from afar. We couldn’t play with him as we did with the jolly uncle, and yet we didn’t fear him as we did the bearish uncle.

The youngest uncle on the Jones side of the house we called Bubber. He was young enough to play with us, yet old enough to know everything, or so we thought.

He knew exactly how to cross the sticks to give a kite the proper shape and balance, how to tie and stretch the strings around these sticks, and where to put paste on the paper cover. He knew, too, how to mix and cook the flour and water that we used for paste.

He knew, almost to an inch, how long a kite's tail ought to be, and whether to lengthen or shorten the tail if the kite wouldn't go up. Moreover, he knew just what time of year to make kites, and which way to run so they would catch the wind as I, who was the tallest of his nieces and nephews, stood on tiptoe to hold high our homemade flyer.

One of the joy-peaks of my childhood was the day a kite actually flew. It flew the full length of the string—all the string we could buy at the village store with Sunday School money we had saved back for two Sundays.

It flew so high that one or two of the grown-ups came out in the orchard to see it, then a mere speck in the sky. But how tight that string was! Some of the family prophesied that the string would break and then we would lose the kite, cord, tail, and all. Whether it did or not, I don't remember; but I do remember wishing we could have had at least one more Sunday's pennies so we could have flown her out of sight.

Bubber could make doll furniture, just right for dolls the size of mine, and strong enough for them to sit on in the little cardboard playhouse he also made. He whittled out the parts for the furniture from soft wood and fastened them together with pins and small nails. He even painted one suite of furniture, the one he gave me for Christmas.



Uncle and a Steam Engine

Neither kites nor doll furniture were Bubber's chief interest. The ache of his heart and his principal efforts were toward steam engines. A steam engine at the time was his God, no less, and what was his God was mine. I have watched him sit for what seemed hours, staring at the picture of the toy steam engine in the mail-order catalogue, and staring at the black letters and figures about it, "Only \$1.98."

As heartbreaking as anything I remember of my childhood was the way that boy wanted that steam engine. But the nearest he could ever get to it was 78 cents. With all his savings, and all my savings, and all our embezzlement of Sunday School pennies, that amount was all we could raise. That \$1.98 seemed as far away as a million and ninety-eight thousand.

There seems an old law of nature which decrees that if we can't get our must-haves in one way, we will in another. So we

two resolved that if we couldn't buy a steam engine, we'd make one.

I don't remember whether we began with the furnace or with the boiler, but we finally got the two together in a far corner of the orchard. We selected a spot that would be out of sight of the house, one that was well-screened by blackberry briars and sassafras bushes.

The furnace was made of field stones and some good stiff clay for mortar. To make our mortar doubly strong we got some ashes out of the kitchen stove and some salt out of the meat barrel in the smokehouse. With these we plastered the whole, just as we had seen Grandma patch the cracks in the oven of her box-stove. That mixture should make the furnace smoke-tight.

The boiler had started out being a syrup bucket. Grandpa always kept "bought" syrup on hand. Whatever this omniscient young uncle did to the bucket to put it into its final form was more than I can remember now, but there was a matter of cutting and soldering. I do remember that. I remember, too, that when he had it in place, it lay on its side instead of sitting on its bottom as I thought a respectable syrup bucket ought to do. But he showed me again the picture in the mail-order catalogue and convinced me that a boiler should be placed that way.

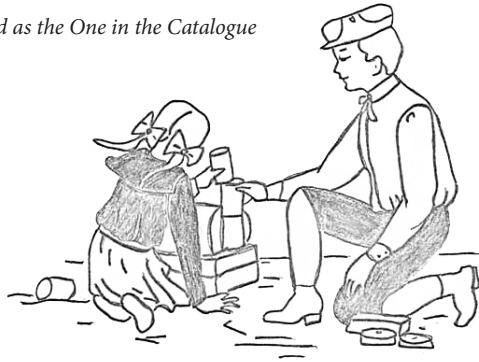
A salmon can, or rather a stack of salmon cans, made our smoke pipe. I was busy making blackberry jam in a sardine can

I found in the lane, but I helped Bubber all I could with the “engineering” by bringing articles and materials that he needed from the house, barn, and woodshed.

I didn’t understand a great deal about what he was doing, or why, but I listened carefully as he explained, and I took great pride in the whole affair, especially the whistle. That was the part I understood best.

It had a “governor,” I remember. It had some wheels made of Babbitt metal (I could remember that because it always made me think of rabbits). We melted the white metal and molded the wheels in a shoe-polish box. He pointed out that in some ways our engine was almost as good as the one in the catalogue. But to me the two didn’t look alike. And looks counted much in my conception of steam engines.

Almost as Good as the One in the Catalogue



It seemed days before we were ready to start the fire, but at last the time came. I had a pile of dead grass and twigs and

broken brush ready beside the furnace, then I was permitted to go to the house for matches. I got them off the mantel in the kitchen, after first seeing that Grandma was well settled with company in the front of the house.

The fire started off well, and we were jubilant. The boiler got hotter and hotter, but no whistle blew. We wondered if, when it did, the grown-ups at the house would hear it and come a-meddling. But we didn't have long to wonder. In fact, we never did know how loudly the little whistle might have blown if it had had a fair chance.

Just then Uncle Herman, the primpy uncle, came traipsing through the orchard with his rabbit rifle on his shoulder. He saw our smoke and bounded into the thicket wanting to know what in the world we were doing!

We tried to explain, but all he could understand was that we had put water into a syrup bucket, sealed it up tight, and built a fire under it—we were fixing to blow our heads off, he said. He kicked the bucket off the furnace, stamped out our fire, and went to the house to “tell Pa.” That was Grandpa.

Even worse! He didn't merely tell Grandpa. I think that Grandpa would have smiled and understood. But tragic for us, especially for the machinery-loving Bubber—he told his Ma. And that was Grandma!



