

The Piano That Wasn't

Friends

When the barnyard's morning activities had quieted down, the cows had been milked and turned out on the road to their grazing for the day, the last little galloping calf had been herded into his lean-to-stable and securely buttoned in, and when Grandpa and Old Fan were out of sight around the bend of the road, we were again ready to start on toward the woodslot.

First, we had to stop by for Maude and Pearl and Eddie who lived down the lane. They were regularly our playmates, and they knew a wealth of delightful games and woodsy secrets. Goin' to Grandma's wouldn't have been nearly the fun that it was without Maude and Pearl and Eddie. We would hop, skip, dance, trot, and canter up the lane between the orchard and the lower field. We climbed over the big gates. I can't remember when we tried to open a gate, a big one, that is. Those gates, with their well-spaced horizontal slats, were made to be climbed.

Near the big gate in the lower field side was the old pound apple tree with the biggest, mellowest, juiciest applies I have ever known. Strange to say, as many times as we went to

Grandma's that tree was never barren, the apples never scanty, sour, nor green.

I remember the time my brother wheedled Mama out of a highly prized pearl-handled lady's pocket knife. It was the one she kept in her letter box for special purposes like sharpening pencils, ripping seams, or trimming corns when Papa's razor wasn't at home. We well understood that it was something to keep our hands off. However, on that morning Clarence had managed to borrow it for "just a few minutes," but forgot to give it back.

When we reached the pound apple tree he nonchalantly drew the knife from his pocket and proceeded to peel an apple—a rare performance in our group—we took our apples straight and our peaches fuzz-first. Eddie envied him. I knew he did. We all did. Possession of a pocketknife in those days put a boy almost into the capitalist class.

The Biggest, Mellowest Apples



Anyway, about that time, Elsie discovered a nest of blue eggs high in the tree. Boy like, Clarence dropped apple, knife, and the straw hat under his arm to skin up the tree and see the nest. When he came down the knife was gone. Clarence declared that the hogs had eaten it. So we fearfully awaited the death of the guilty shoat.

I don't know how the thought of this impending tragedy affected the other children, but I actually lost sleep over it wondering what Grandpa would say about the loss of his pig, and what Mama would do about the loss of her knife. The dire possibilities were an overwhelming shadow to me. We watched and looked for days, but no hog died and no knife was found.

I'd rather not mention what the boy got for losing the knife, but will state that hair brushes were dual purpose in those days. The smokehouse was both jail and jury room. The smell of a smokehouse makes me sigh even today, and it's not altogether a sign of nostalgic longing.

If, in going to the woodslot, we followed the path by the potato-house or went by the cider shed and up through the orchard, we were certain to stop at The Playhouse. Many times our route was planned that way. The route also took us by the sweet-apple tree, the Hoss apple tree, (named, they said, for Old Bishop Hoss and not Old Fan's kin), through the sassafras bushes, the plum thicket, and by the crabapple tree.

The Playhouse was most important. How I pity children who have never known what it is to play "Mrs." in a real playhouse. It

had a roof, which we could barely reach, walls, and a chimney just like grown-up houses. It had a window that would open and close, a door with a miniature latchstring, and a latch. In style it was much like a gingerbread house I had seen somewhere in a storybook.

The walls inside were papered with funny papers, which extolled the adventures of Mule Maud and Si, Buster Brown and Tige, the Katzenjammer Kids and the unfortunate Captain. There were pictures on the wall, too, of bright colored birds which came with the Arm & Hammer soda that Grandma put in her cornbread and biscuits and used in scalding her milk vessels. Pasted to the ceiling were pages from *The Youth's Companion*, which Aunt Ada took for a while. There were also these pages from *Godey's Ladies' Book*, *Delineator*, *Ladies Home Journal*. With all these decorations, if we became bored with our own company while in the Playhouse we could read our wallpaper, or try to.

The Playhouse had a real little front yard, one about the size of Grandma's Sunday dinner table, a real fence around it with gate and a latch, and real flowers growing in the yard.

The uncles and aunts had made this little playhouse and had planted its yard during their own growing up days. What a debt we owed them!

The playhouses that took most of our attention and time were the ones that we ourselves made in the woodslot around the roots of trees, on sand beds in gullies, on large flat rocks

swept clean with brush brooms, but most frequently in the corners of the old zig-zag rail fences. The fence row corners were perfect for houses of many rooms.



Woodland Arts

And with us always were Maude and Pearl and Eddie. Maude was plump and ruddy, Pearl was thin and frankly freckled, and Eddie was just an ordinary little boy, even though he did grow up to be a banker.

Among them they knew many of the woodland arts, such as how to make a popgun for dogwood berries; where the best berries could be found; how to make a whistle from chestnut twigs; and how to ride down a sapling and make it behave like a wild and prancing horse. They knew, most of the time, which saplings to ride, but sometimes they made mistakes. Maude rode a sassafras once and it broke, so did the arm she fell on. One day Pearl rode a sapling of stubborn oak, or tried to, and got suspended in mid air. It took the combined weight of the five of us to get her close enough to the ground that she could turn it loose.

They knew how to make little furnaces and how to cook the products we could find in orchard, garden, and chickenyard. We tried to make jam in an oyster can, but had no sugar. We tried to fry slices of sweet-apples, but had no grease. From the

amount of smoke that got in our eyes we decided that maybe the Indians didn't have such an easy time after all. Food that would cook well on an outdoor fire was hard to find.

We did have a rich haul one day, however. We found a hen's nest out back of the playhouse that we were sure Grandma didn't know about. Maude, Elsie, and I gathered up some of the eggs in our aprons. Pearl, Clarence, and Eddie brought up enough wood to replenish the fire. Not having sufficient cooking vessels to boil or fry the eggs we decided to lay them all on the tin shingle top of our little furnace-stove and let them bake.

It was not until the fire began to burn lustily that we realized that the hen who had owned the nest was about to become a mother. Well, we didn't eat any more of our cooking that day. And we hardly ate any supper that night either, despite the fact that Grandma had specially prepared egg custard, dressed eggs, and cornstarch pudding.

Better than anything else Maude and Pearl and Eddie knew how to make woodland playhouses, and with their coaching and our own originality, that became our favorite business, too.

Every mossy bank or shady grassy plot made us think of playing house. If there were several such places close together each of us set up housekeeping, and among us we established a "town." The boys, of course, had to run the store, the mill, and the blacksmith shop, but in our "towns" those jobs were not too

difficult. Before the house sites could be allotted, there had to be a counting out with some such rhyme as:

“one-two-three. Mother caught a flea”

or

“One-ry, oh-ry, ick-o-ry, Ann.”

Sometimes we didn't count; we just drew straws, broken leaf stems, or blades of grass to see who got the shortest straw for a choice of locations.

Once a space was allotted we would sweep the floors of our respective residences with brush brooms, leaving neat the bright moss, the smooth grass, the rough stone, or the bare ground. Then we locked our houses with a tick-a-lock, tick-a-lock clucking sound we made with our tongues, and fared forth in search of furnishings.



Imagine

If a stone or plank was found that could be imagined into the shape of a bureau top it was hurriedly placed in a bedroom which, by the way, was partitioned off from the dining room with rows of stones or broken sticks. Those made effective walls. We had walls of the same kind around our houses, and one was honor-bound not to cross such a wall without the unlocking procedure with the proper key and tick-a-lock sound.

It was not always hard to find a rock shaped somewhat like a bed. Of course, a bed might have five sides instead of the conventional four, but we overlooked such small defects. We could “imagine” one side off.

We found flat, square-like stones sometimes that could serve as pillows if propped up at the heads of our beds. Wild grape leaves made pillow shams. All the good housewives we knew—our mothers, grandmothers, and black mammies—had pillow shams. We imagined that ours were embroidered in turkey red to say “Good Morning” or “Good Night.”

Large flat stones with smaller stones under them were tables. Acorn cups and hickory-nut hulls were dishes. Frequently we found large empty acorns that would serve as vases or jardinières for the yellow sheep sorrel or pink oxalis “lilies.”

House furnishings for those play-like villages required all of our ingenuity, much imagination, and considerable searching. We roamed the woods, fields, and roadsides looking. Occasionally one of us would be extremely fortunate. Being fortunate meant finding such a prize as a piece of broken colored glass, a blue fragment from a quinine bottle, a brown one from a bitters bottle, or a green one from we didn’t know what. At any rate, the glass-possessor became the envy of the other five.

What we couldn’t find or imagine, we were obliged to make. That was where the clay in the lower field came in. With generous lumps of this mud, stingy little dabs of water,

dipped and toted from the nearest hog-wallow, or transported in whatever containers we could find from the chickenyard-trough (formerly a stove door), or from the pond or spring at the far end of the woodslot, we tediously met many of our household needs with clumsy mud-covered fingers, or with little paddles pilfered from Grandpa's kindling shed.

We made bowls, cakes, bricks, and vases. I tried to make a cedar water bucket like the one that held place of honor on the washstand, but having no bail and no brass bands my bucket turned out to be just a deep clay bowl. Eddie said it looked like a salt gourd, and I wouldn't speak to him the rest of the day.

We attempted to make from mud any household furnishings we needed except, of course, our lace curtains, bed "kiverlets," chair tidies, and our table cloths. These, like certain articles of our apparel such as belts, caps, bracelets, and aprons, were made of leaves using stems to "pin" them together.

Maude was the oldest of us, the one who could outdo all the rest with both accomplishments and ideas. The last summer we played in the woodslot she was thirteen. I had just turned twelve, but I felt twelve-and-a-half when I was with her. Often I harbored a slight grudge because of the fact that I hadn't been born sooner so I could be as old and important as Maude. Anyway, when she got a bright idea, I tried to get one too.

One day Maude found a sort of humped-up rock that she called an organ. She began at once to make a parlor for the prize. A parlor like the ones our mothers had. One that would

be so fine that she wouldn't use it for anything except company, courtships, weddings, and funerals. One of the boys, she said, would be the preacher and could come to her house, eat dinner, and hear her play the organ. Both the boys were five years old so they made small protest.



The Piano

Well, if Maude had found a piece of blue glass, one of brown, one of green, one of red, and piece of broken mirror besides, I couldn't have felt worse about them all than I did about that brown stone organ she had placed on the green moss carpet of her rail-fence corner parlor.

All the rest of the morning I searched the woods, the pastures, and even the lane, orchard, and cornfield for another humpbacked rock, or better still, one that could be imagined into the shape of a piano—a piano like the one we had at home in Sunday School. No such rock could I find.

That afternoon Maude and Pearl and Eddie had to go to the church to practice for Children's Day. Not being native we didn't have to go, or as the other children said, we "couldn't be in it." So after dinner and naps we went back to the woods. Again for the umpteenth time I searched for a piano-shaped rock. I didn't find one that even my imagination could conscientiously use. At last, disappointed, but not down, I went

back to my rail fence residence, next corner to Maude's. I took an imaginary key from my imaginary pocket and turned it in the lock. I made a click with my tongue and went into my house to sit down and think.

Hadn't I met other difficulties? Hadn't I made vases of clay when I didn't find acorns large enough? Hadn't I made skillets and bowls and buckets? That was it. I would make a piano of clay. I'd go into seclusion and not let the others know what I was doing no matter how hard they might beg. I'd make a piano just like the one at Sunday School.

The piano was not completed until after the other children had already gone home for supper. I was brimming with pride. I admired its slick brown sides, spit-polished top, almost well-shaped keyboard, and even its little lion's paw toes, which I added as an afterthought. These made it look more stylish and really more parlorish than ever. I lifted it gently out of the ditch and placed it cat-a-cornered in the mossiest spot of all in my zig-zag residence. Then I took one more admiring look and walked out. I turned the key again in the lock that wasn't there, put the imaginary key in my pocket of like kind, and danced and trotted down the lane to the house, thinking how I would gloat over Maude the next morning.

That night the rain came down like public opinion. It rained so hard that Grandma had to get up during the night and come upstairs with the dishpan, washpan, two pudding pans, and

a slop jar to put them under the chronic leaks so the water wouldn't circle the straw matting on her bedroom floors.

Next morning the whole world was wet. The barnyard was a loblolly mess. We were delayed somewhat in getting off to play because Grandma said the grass was too wet and the lane too muddy for us to be out. We finally got away, scrambled over the big gate, and skipped up the lane toward the woodslot. I could hardly wait until we could get to the playhouses, but first we had to stop for Maude and Pearl and Eddie. They hadn't finished their after-breakfast chores. While we waited, I confided to Elsie and Clarence that I had an enormous secret, but I wouldn't tell them what it was.

At last the others were ready, and we all hustled off to the woods and our rail-fence village. Proudly I led them to my house, but I didn't turn the key in the lock. I saw, we all saw, that my beautiful piano had melted. All my art, all my afternoon's efforts, all my cause for exaltation had settled down into a lump of sticky clay mud.



All My Art, All My Afternoon's Efforts