

Yellow Jasmine and a Hope Chest

A Hopeful Despair Barrel

Certain parts of my education were really broad. But neither Caesar's bridge nor his conquering seemed very important to me then. By that time, you see, I was desperately in love. First it was the blond, then the brunette, then a sandy haired dandy.

During high school days I had a number of love affairs, although in most cases nobody knew of them but me. It was usually the handsomest young man in the class that I admired from afar, and most unobtrusively. I am sure that not a single object of my affection ever suspected that he was so honored. There seemed in those days no really ladylike way of letting a young man know he was admired. And, poor, timid maiden that I was, I suppose I should have died outright if I had thought that anyone suspected how deeply and irreparably in love I was. More suffering in silence. For half a dozen years or more, I had one heartbreak after another, all of the silent kind.

Summer vacations between school terms were not too exciting. Mama usually kept a few boarders who were in for

the morning and evening meals. I was roused out of bed far too early in the mornings and assigned to the duties of putting wood into the stove, making biscuits, and setting the table. After breakfast came dishes, floors, and beds. What monotony!

I was trusted to peel and stew potatoes and make hoecakes for lunch. Mama never would risk my cooking ability too far, but as a special treat she did let me make myself a chocolate layer cake for my birthday. After lunch each day I lay down in the parlor to take a nap, because all the family agreed that I seemed generally “run down.” At supper I again peeled potatoes, put wood in the stove, set the table, rolled pie crusts, and cut biscuits. After supper, dishes again, and so to bed.

This program was varied sometimes by a Rook game with some of the neighbor girls in the evening, or with sitting in the front yard in the summer afternoons crocheting pillow-slip edging for my Hope Chest—or Despair Barrel, as kid brother Clarence called it. There were few beaus or dates, for Mama was strict, and she let that be known throughout the neighborhood.

Occasionally the neighborhood girls and I were permitted to “go out walking” on Sunday afternoon. The most thrilling place we had to walk to and through was the cemetery. I think we memorized the inscriptions on every monument there. We knew more people dead than living. But the nicest thing about going out walking to the cemetery was coming back home by the depot. And there was plenty of life there when the late afternoon train came in!

Of course we girls were occasionally allowed a slumber party, just a small one of course, where one or two or three went to spend the night with another one or two or three. Of course, there was very little slumbering done at such parties. Mostly just giggling.

But the most fun of all was going to the Fair in late summer. Again we traveled in packs; and did a little flirting with the young men who also were traveling in packs. Of course, we had opportunities every Sunday to go to Sunday School and Church, and to the young peoples' meetings in the early evenings. And occasionally one of us would pull a "walk home" date. But all of our parents were "strict."



What Goes Around...

In the late fall after the summer following high school graduation, it was decided that I must try school-teaching to get a little experience in the wide, wide world, and to help out with the family income. I was still not quite half past eighteen, and certainly I couldn't have been trusted with a school of my own. But Aunt Molly and her daughter Edi' Mai had contracted to teach a three-room school down in Georgia, and I was to teach the third room. Aunt Molly taught first and second grades; Edi' Mai sixth and seventh; and I had that very interesting group of third, fourth, and fifth.

The locality was in the south-central part of Georgia, at Dexter near Dublin, and the county of Laurens, one which the school superintendent said “paid out more money for Tennessee mules and Tennessee school teachers than any other commodities.” From the time I got my first monthly paycheck of \$30.00, I had little doubt as to which “commodity” was considered more valuable—even though there did seem to be more children than crops.

My clearest recollections of those days are of the charred pine stumps in fields of white sand; sweet potatoes fresh out of the hill; juicy cane stalks that the children brought to the teacher in lieu of apples; the nostalgic odor of fatty pine knots burning in stoves and fireplaces in late evenings and early morning; ribbons of green that were cotton rows; beauty of yellow jasmine and blue and white violets blooming in the piney woods; the flavor of peanut-fed, fresh pork, hoecakes; fat biscuits (tender and flaky); cane syrup; white and fluffy butter; and grease-soaked collards.

I remember well my most embarrassing moment. I wanted very much to make a good impression on our new landlord who had agreed to board us three teachers for \$11 a month each. Mrs. Faircloth needed some water in the kitchen and to show her how smart I was I grabbed the wooden bucket and rushed to the well to draw some for her.

Somehow in my hurry and enthusiasm I let the chain slip through my hands too fast and dropped bucket, chain and all,

right down into the well! In my misery I felt that my reputation, my career, my chance of continued teaching in Georgia all went to the bottom of the well with that bucket. I knew I was sunk, for Mr. Faircloth was sitting on the porch and he had seen the whole performance. And Mr. Faircloth was on the School Board!

I felt that I could read his mind as he sat there leaning back and puffing his cob pipe—that the Buckhorn School Board wouldn't want to keep a teacher that couldn't go after a bucket of water and come back with even the bucket.

But Mr. Faircloth, as I learned later, was really a prince of a man. He acted as though dropping the bucket in the well was an everyday occurrence for everybody. He reached up to a nail on the wall and brought down a hayhook attached to a plowline. With a little fishing he brought up bucket and chain and made no unpleasant comment.

From then on I would have been his slave. In the afternoons after school I would help him and his daughter, Miss Naomi, with whatever chores they would permit me to do. I helped shuck corn for the shoats; I helped seed some special cotton that he didn't want to send to the gin; and in the evenings by the firelight I sat in the family room until bed-time and shelled peanuts by the pan full. Those peanuts were for seed, and had to be carefully handled. And when the time came for a new turn of meal, I shelled corn until my thumbs were blistered. Indeed I paid well for that dropped bucket.

The fact that most of the girls in that neighborhood were married at fifteen or younger made me in my nineteenth year practically a spinster. In fact Edi' Mai and I both might have been considered "on the shelf" in another community, but there, girls were scarce, and boys were plentiful; and after all we *were* the new teachers. So every swain who bought a new buggy or broke in a new mule tried the same out with us.

We went to candy-drawings, tent meetings, play-parties or folk dances, neighborhood singings, funerals, sitting-ups, quiltings, and just plain "out-drivings." There was little or no monotony.



Jasmine and Violets

As much fun as anything else were the Sunday afternoon "out-drivings." Most of the time we had a different young man, a different new buggy, or a different young mule. But as spring approached and Valentine's Day came and passed, I was more inclined to go out-driving every Sunday afternoon with the same young man. That same young man also was more likely to be he of the steady date on Wednesday night, as well as Sunday night. Yes, springtime became an era of "specialization" as to dates.

Sometimes on the out-drivings we'd let the mule pick his way slowly along the sand-boggy country road; sometimes to

a neighboring town for ice cream; sometimes to a community singing or church service; more often we let him choose the beautiful old Swamp Road, with its masses of green bay leaves and wild honeysuckle, yellow jasmine, and other woods flowers; and with gray Spanish moss overhanging from pine, live oak, or cypress “knees” in the bog.

The yellow jasmine was a great favorite with me, I loved to string the blossoms on long strands of wire-grass and make romantic little haloes, necklaces, or bracelets. I felt sure they must enhance whatever girlish beauty I might have, and the young man of the afternoon, whether “steady” or not, never did argue that point as far as I remember.

Of course, the flower I love best in all the world is the shy and timid violet, lovely in its daintiness and delicious in its fragrance. The most violets I had ever seen were in the piney woods of Georgia. Especially in the swamps which have a violet of their own, an enormous and gorgeous white one.

Imagine my surprise one evening to receive from the “date of the day” a very large bunch of white swamp violets. I thought they were the loveliest I had ever seen, and said so. The stems were so long and the blooms were so large the bouquet was as big as a bowl. Ecstatically I buried my face in the depths of beauty! Imagine my shock to learn, not that the lily had been gilded, but that the violets had been scented—and scented with the cheapest and commonest kind of baby talcum! Much as I love the deep purple garden violets, or the paler blue woods

violets, I don't think I could ever again look a white violet in the face without a shudder.

Monday mornings we three teachers set out rather early to wind our way toward school. Monday mornings in Georgia were generally fair, and usually Friday afternoons were rainy. Mr. Faircloth said Friday would always be fairest or foulest, and usually he was right.



The Children Were Precious

When the weather was dry the white sand along the road ruts would sift into our shoes, so there had to be stops along the road to take off and shake shoes. And at every rambling farmhouse or cross-roads a group of children joined us, until by the time we got to school we had most of the pupils in train. The children were very precious, sometimes rather mischievous, but mostly well-behaved and much interested in attending school.

It was my luck, good or bad, to have among the third grade pupils the neighborhood's "worst little bad boy." He was a problem child, and proud of it; in fact his family and all the neighborhood seemed proud of his naughty accomplishments. Our private war began on the first day of school; and if I must admit it, he seemed to win just about every battle.

He was big as boys in the third grade go, and he was genuinely an artist at being bad. I tried persuasion, ignoring, diversion,

every manner of managing an unmanageable youngster that was in my poor slim bag of school teaching tricks.

Finally I kept him after school one afternoon and resorted to a thorough and complete spanking. My hand burned for the remainder of the day; but next morning the erstwhile bad little boy brought to school a big juicy stalk of sugar cane from his parent's cane-bed, and ever after we were fast friends. He was always the first one who volunteered to get me a switch if another child was misbehaving; and best of all, he passed his grade that year. For the first time in three years he got out of the third grade. We both thought that was an accomplishment.

He Stood Six-feet-two



A pupil in the fourth grade was one who had never been allowed to go to school when he was of school age. He always had to stay at home and work with the crops. However, on the day he was twenty-one and “a man of his own” as he expressed

it, he started school. At the age of twenty-four he was in the fourth grade, and in my room.

He stood six-feet-two, and must have weighed nearly 200 pounds. His teacher was a fraction under five-five, and weighed not more than 103. I lived in constant fear of the day when that fourth-grade pupil might miss his lesson or be a bad boy, and need a switching. But I never had an excuse to even keep him in after school.

After those few delightful months of school-teaching and out-drivings in Georgia—when the yellow jasmine had finished blooming and cotton was ready for the children to stop school and chop weeds, we three teachers pulled ourselves away from Georgia's paychecks and romances and returned to Tennessee.

I settled down again to potato peeling, crocheting, and Rook-playing, and Mama's strictness. Mama never could have understood the romance of going out-driving down a swamp road with the white sand underneath and Spanish moss overhead, and bay leaves, white violets, and yellow jasmine all around—or would she?



My Education Continued

Sunday School and Church activities relieved the monotony somewhat, but even a Sunday School picnic in Tennessee was not so much fun as a candy drawing or a play-party in Georgia,

not to speak of the sitting-ups (with sick or dead), or the dates with young men who had new buggies and/or spry young mules. In the fall of that year I was old enough to start trying to be a city school teacher in my own neighborhood, and my “education” continued.

Again I taught third, fourth, and fifth grade classes—the overflow pupils from the regular grade rooms. And you can imagine the kinds of pupils the regular teachers picked out to send to the “Overflow Room.”

As I got better acquainted with the children, it seemed I had been given the smartest and dullest, the badest and the goodest in school. Each seemed extreme in one way or another. Each child seemed “special” in some way or another, and I didn’t feel that I was specialist enough to meet the job. In the afternoons I would feel too exhausted to climb the stairs to my room at home. I’d have to lie down in the parlor, usually, before I could get up and help cook supper.

All too soon, to my way of thinking, it would be time to get up, change clothes, kindle a fire in the kitchen box-stove and start peeling potatoes or mixing biscuit dough for the boarders’ supper. Mama always tried to keep a few boarders for two meals a day. They did help to pay the grocery bill, she said, and they could give me some spare time employment potato-peeling and dishwashing before and after school.

Most of the consolation I got, outside of the fun with the children, was thinking about how much money I was making!

In Georgia I had made \$30 a month. From this I paid my board of \$11 a month, sent Mama \$10, and skimped essentials and my home-bound railroad fare out of the remainder.

But in Tennessee, I was paid \$40 a month. Half of that went to family expenses, for, as I said, I was living at home. Ten dollars each month went into the bank to pay for going to summer school; and the remaining \$10 was splurged on clothes, books, knickknacks, or whatever a young girl's fancy dictated. There were times, I admit, when the dictates had to be slightly pinched because the city school required better clothes than had been necessary for the country one.

But every day my "education" was continuing. Those "special" pupils taught me a great many things that my own former teachers had neglected, overlooked, or hadn't even learned.

I remember one bitterly cold day. In those days the teachers who arrived too early were permitted to go right on into the warm building. They were supposed to go in, open up, and be ready for the children. But the pupils, poor little shivering mites, had to stand outside in the street until the bell would ring.

I confess it now; I always felt like a first-class heel every time I entered that gate, trudged up the hill and into that warm building before the children did. However, I was too scared for my job ever to mention such a thing to the Principal or Superintendent.

When the doors were opened each morning after the bell had rung the children rushed in like peas poured out of a bag. Bringing up the rear one day was a very small, chubby, black-haired first-grader, with a very red button nose, and fat stiff blue-red fingers. His eyes and nose were running but his feet were not. I guessed by the way he was stumbling along that those little feet must be almost frozen. I didn't know the little fellow's name but a family resemblance led me to believe he was a member of a certain biggish family. If so, he had trudged about nine blocks on that zero morning. Quite a trudge for a little fellow like that, I knew, for I myself had trudged eight.

I led him as close to the radiator as I could get for the other children crowding around; rubbed his stiff little fingers and did what I could about the nose and eyes. Then I remembered the feet. I drew up a chair, took him on my lap, pulled off his shoes and his snow-wet socks, and began to play "Piggy went to market" with his toes.

Years later, a voice on the telephone reintroduced me to this lad. He was by then a famous writer and if there should ever be any gossip about my playing games with his distinguished toes, the entire matter was due to circumstances and weather beyond our control—as you might well understand if you have ever stood out in a chilly street waiting for that old school bell to ring.

Having had little scientific training in teaching, and scarcely any coaching in child psychology, I think I merely acted on

instinct, and instinct led me to try to feel and be just one of the children and to try to understand just how each child felt about his surroundings. This, I hoped, would lead to a more complete understanding between teacher and pupils.

That understanding was less than complete I learned when time came for the first quarterly examinations. During three hectic months I had been giving all that was in me toward putting the prescribed geography, history, reading, 'riting, arithmetic, and even spelling into my fourth grade group, as well as into the third and fifth grades.

We were using Frye's big old blue-back geography book, and I had been conscientiously following the book, explaining each sentence, using my handy roll-up wall map to back me up on locations.

On this first exam I took the first question in the Map Questions in the Geography Book—one we had rehearsed for weeks. The children had been well drilled on the Northeastern States, I was certain.

That first question on the fourth grade's first examination was: "Give reasons for the dense population in the Northeastern States." The answer that one of my well-coached pupils gave, in all sincerity, was:

"The reasons for the dense population in the Northeastern States is that most of the people come from somewheres else and they brung dense with them and give it to the population."

In the afternoons after school I generally walked along with whichever of the pupils went my way. But when a rainy day

came I could nearly always look out the window about time for school to be out, and see a sleek black horse and a shiny new buggy. Then I knew I wouldn't have to walk home in the rain.

As time went on, sometimes I'd see the black horse and that less-new buggy waiting in front of the schoolhouse even on days that were not rainy. Sunday afternoons there were "out-drivings" with that same black horse and his driver, a sturdy, steady, and persistent Scottish farmer.

Finally, and especially after I had graded that particular examination paper, I decided that I had done enough harm to the teaching profession, and it might be, after all, a good time for me to "reform" from teaching, and get off the path to old-maid-dom by accepting an engagement ring. There seemed to be just one way to get rid of that Scots's persistence, so I promised to take the chance.

He set out to find a farm, one with plenty of rich, plowable land; I redoubled my efforts at crocheting, trying to fill that Hope Chest to the hinges with lace-edged pillow slips.

Out Driving With The Same Young Man



