

October Days, November Nights

A Christian Gentle Man

UNCLE FAYETTE

The relationship between Southern whites and Southern blacks is as hard to explain and describe as are the brightness and haze of the Southern sunset. There are relationships that are bright with mutual appreciation and understanding and there are relationships that are gray with the blur of misunderstanding. Happily, most of my friendships with the “colored” people and the Negroes have been of the bright variety.

From as far back as I can remember, starting with Aunt Ann, we had colored friends and helpers. Most faithful and best loved of all our old family-helpers was Uncle Fayette. During all the long years I knew Uncle Fayette, he was always “‘bout forty” years old. From the time I was a very small child until my own children were almost grown up, Uncle Fayette, according to his own calculations, was never a year older—despite the fact that he had one or more birthdays every year. It was not until the talk came up about old age pensions that he remembered

he was born in June 1861, or as he counted, “the year the War broke out.”

We had heard the old man boast many times that he was “born a slave,” and when he finally figured out the exact date I said to him, “Well, Uncle Fayette, if you were born in 1861, you just did get here in time to be a slave.”

“Yes’m,” he replied, “Jes’ did git borned in time! Specks if I had to do it all over again, feeling like I does now, I specks I’d be late.”

According to his “rickoleckshuns” Fayette Thornton had a variety of birthplaces. Sometimes he mentioned Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, sometimes Pulaski, Tennessee. But most of the time it was Florence, Alabama—I think that was because he thought Florence a prettier name, and because Alabama sounded more like a “foreign country.” He had a great yearning toward “foreign countries”—until World War I came along. After that he was strictly a native Tennessean.

It was always a source of great concern to Uncle Fayette whether his father was “dead yet.” It seems that when he was a year and a half old, as his mother told him many times, his father “got on a big black horse with a mean old nigger woman, and rode away to the North, leaving his wife and three little children in a cold world torn by a hot war.”

Uncle Fayette said that from the time he got to be twenty-one he had been hoping to find his father and tell him what he thought of him. As long as he lived he still had hopes. Frequently,

when he was a really old man, we'd hear him mumbling to himself out in the garden, and saying over and over again the things he was "gonna tell dem two niggers" if he ever found them.

Going on with his life's story, he said that his mother and her small impoverished family moved to Pulaski, right up within half a block of the courthouse, and that they were living there when the Ku Klux Klan was organized there on the court square.

Many's the sleepless night, he said, when he and his brother and sister, with their mother, would huddle in a corner of their upstairs room and listen to the tramp, tramp, gallop, gallop of the big horses, and the weird whistles of the Klansmen.

"What'd they do?" we'd ask him.

"Well, they'd go out to some old, no-'count nigger's house and call him out, an' if they was a rain barrel handy, they'd turn hit over, an' turn him down across hit—and then—they'd shore wait on dat nigger!"

From the time Papa died in 1906 until Mama married again many years later, our small family of Mama, Elsie, Clarence, and I were Uncle Fayette's special charges. It was his religion, he said, to look after widows and orphans, and we can testify that during these years he practiced his religion thoroughly.

There was never a cold zero morning that he didn't come trudging across town that long mile between his house and ours, each foot wrapped in a gunny sack, his head wrapped in a

red wool scarf under his hat, two coats and a sweater under his big greenish-brown black overcoat (no telling how old that coat was, but it was always well-brushed) and his hands wrapped in sox and thrust deep in his pockets.

He thought he'd better come over, he'd say, and see about his widow and his orphans. He'd thaw out by the kitchen stove and eat a small hot breakfast; then he'd go out to the wood house and begin loading up our house with wood, coal, and kindling. He'd do any other odd jobs that needed doing, such as thawing pipes, feeding the chickens, and shoveling snow. He'd eat a bowl of hot soup at noon, take the little package of supper that Mama had fixed up for him and plod back across town, his "religion" 'tended to for that spell of weather.

HIS RELIGION

When Mama was no longer a widow, when Elsie and Clarence had married and moved away, and when I found a husband and settled down on the farm, Uncle Fayette looked us all over and decided, I suppose, who was the neediest one of the four. I was the lucky choice, so when "Aunt" Fanny died and his son went to "Dee-troit," Uncle Fayette, after much persuasion, did the thing we all knew he wanted to do—came to the farm to "take care" of us.

And what priceless years those were! There are few people I have known whose influence I'd exchange for that which that stooped and hoary old colored gentleman had on our family,

especially on our growing boy and girl. They adored him, as did we all.

Uncle Fayette was genteel and quiet. He was humility itself, beautifully so—and not of the Uriah Heap kind! But somehow he always managed subtly to make up about three-fifths of any group he happened to be in. The same was true in our family circle. In his quiet, unassuming way he had a part in most of the farm and family activities, in the house or out-of-doors.

There were mornings when I'd oversleep (greatest of all luxuries) and when I'd get up so late I'd be ashamed to look the clock in the face. But, just as I'd expected, Uncle Fayette would be up and "a-lookin' after his white folks." He would have the wood-box filled, the water drawn, the fire made, and the coffee water boiling.

Uncle Fayette had at one time been cook in a hotel, in the Old Maxwell House in Nashville, he said, and we never had cause to doubt that for he was an excellent cook. The Maxwell House was lucky. For years, we knew, he had also been chief cook, and part of the time the only cook, for a crew of men on the railroad "boarding cars," men engaged in roadwork and bridge building, so he wasn't lost in the kitchen. And he was a model dishwasher—that was another thing I appreciated about him.

He was just as much at home in the flower garden, too. As long as he could see well he could tell weeds from flowers, but sometimes a new variety would fool him.

I had a bed of Newport Pink Sweet Williams that I had coddled for a whole year in hopes of blooms next spring. The next spring had come and the clumps had survived the winter and were looking as sturdy as vermifuge. That, I suppose, was their undoing.

One afternoon while I was away from home, Uncle Fayette figured out a nice surprise for me. He'd get that bed ready for me to plant. When I came home every Sweet William plant had been carefully pulled, had the dirt shaken from its roots, piled up and hauled off. Uncle Fayette had then turned the bed upside down with his spading fork and had it all ready for "Mis' to plant flowers in." He was never told that the "vermifuge" would have been a bed of gorgeous beauty in two more weeks.

Uncle Fayette fairly reveled in garden work. A well-prepared bit of soil, a row of sprouting beans or fruiting tomatoes was a supreme joy and source of pride. He would often say, as he hoed along, "I gener'ly notices dat when I pleases myself wid my work, I always pleases ever'body else. So I jes' works to please myself, but I keeps myself mighty hard to please. Dat's de way I gits along."

There was one morning when the old man put a new term into our family vocabulary without ever knowing he'd done so. We planned to have some fun by asking him, point-blank, while all were present, just which member of the family he would do the most for. Jack? Dad? Margaret? Me? Buppo or Kitty

Boots? Or fish or canary? Margaret added a note of warning, "Be careful how you answer, Uncle Fayette, we're all here."

The old fellow grinned wisely and answered, "I guess I'd better keep out of that trap. I's always been taught to shine de ver' 'pearance of evil." From then on in our household the expression "polishing sins" meant "shining de ver' 'pearance of evil."

Uncle Fayette made a practice of allowing Buppo to stand beside him at mealtime with the dog's nose on the old man's knee. Each time the man divided a biscuit, the dog got half of it.

"Why do you do that way, Uncle Fayette?" I asked. "Why don't you wait until you finish eating and then feed him?"

"Now Mis', don' you mind him. He ain't a-hurtin' nuthin'. It ain't no harm for him to jes' stan' dere peacable-like, a-waiting fer de pass-over."

And pass over it was. I knew the old man well enough to realize that he would have passed over all his food to the pup if there had not been enough for both.

There is no doubt that Uncle Fayette, in some matters, had more endurance and patience and consideration than did other members of the family, but one morning we saw him "stumped!"

That was the morning Buppo came to the house holding all records for body odors. He must have treed two polecats before breakfast, but he was so naive he couldn't understand why we

pinched our noses and shut the door when he came up, tail wagging, to tell us about it.

Uncle Fayette didn't invite him in to breakfast with him that morning, nor for several mornings thereafter. But I did hear the old fellow say in his soft, easy voice to the friendless, mystified, odorous, and despondent dog, "Anybody as sociable as you likes to be ought never to fool wid no skunk."

ANOTHER CO-PILOT WILL COME

There was one week when Buppo, Jack, and Uncle Fayette had a considerable bout with snake-killing. Bup would "tree" them, Jack would shoot them with his 22 rifle, and Uncle Fayette would aid and abet—especially abet, and at a distance. He didn't like snakes except when they were at a great distance and very dead. But he did like to tell stories about the big ones and the odd ones he had seen and heard of.

One day Jack yelled from the sweet-potato patch, "Sister, bring the gun quick! Here's a rattlesnake!"

Margaret lost no time getting the gun, but when the snake was dead enough for examination, the rattlers were not found. It had all the markings of a diamond-back, Jack said, except that important noise box, so he began to inquire of Uncle Fayette what manner of snake it might be.

From his vast fund of information and experience the old man brought forth the fact that the monster was a "co-pilot"—I

know not what the word may be; I spell as 'twas pronounced to me.

“And three days after you kills a co-pilot,” said Uncle Fayette, “a rattler will come to take his place.” So for three days the snake-hunters were on the alert.

Sure enough, on the third day, Bup’s shrill bark told the farm that another snake was on the premises, this time in the cotton patch that Uncle Fayette was so carefully tending. He and Jack rushed to the scene of the commotion with stick and gun. The snake was so coiled that one shot punctured him in three places. But to the great surprise of the party it was another “co-pilot.” Uncle Fayette couldn’t offer any explanation except that it really was a dry summer and that all signs fail in dry weather.

The incidents, however, reminded him of the time he saw a copperhead twice bite a boy as big as Jack.

“We wuz working on the road,” he said, “and one of de old hounds hangin’ ’round chased a young rabbit into a rotten log. The boy was sorter fast, anyhow, so he ran ahead of de others and stuck his hand in de log to get de rabbit ’fo de others got there.

“Mr. Copperhead wuz hidin’ in de log, so he nabbed dat boy right on de end ob his finger. De boy snatched his hand out, looked at it, and stuck hit in agin. He got another slash and when he took his finger out, hit looked like somebody done cut hit wid a knife. Next thing, he stooped down and looked into de log and dere lay dat snake. De men all took hold ob dat log an’

turn hit over, and out come de snake. Dey killed it, and found out what kind it wuz and den dey got scared.

“De boy’s pa, he had on a pair ob ol’ yarn galluses, an’ he took ’em off an’ tied ’em right tight around de boy’s arm to keep de blood from goin’ up to his heart, you know. And den he sent me after a “mad stone.”

“De woman dat had de mad stone lived about a mile and a half away, an’ when I got dar she wasn’t at home. But I got de stone, and got back to whar I started in less’n 45 minutes.

“While I was gone, dey had took a black chicken and had split it open down de back, and had stuck dat boy’s finger in de chicken while hit was still alive. Dey jes’ tied dat chicken to de boy’s finger, and made the young’un drink about a quart of whiskey. After dat he wuz so drunk you couldn’t tell how sick he really wuz.

“Den we got some cockleburs, and made some tea outen dem, and made him drink cocklebur tea wid sweet milk, and dat brung him ’round all right, but I tell you right now, Jack, snakes ain’t good things to fool with, ’specially in August when dey’re blind.”

And that very day Uncle Fayette decided it was time to lay by his cotton crop.

Some of the neighbors laughed at the old man staying out of the cotton patch because a snake had been found there. But when he heard some of their kidding he remarked: “Wal, now, it’s always been my belief dat my time ought to be divided

into two halves. I ought to spend one-half 'tending to my own business, and de other half a-lettin' de other fellow's business alone. Them snakes is de other fellow's business, an' if dey waited fer me to come out dere an' kill 'em, dey could stay out dere 'til dey's old enough to vote."

So for years and years the old colored man, gentleman that he was, was Our Man "Friday," and Our Man "Saturday," "Monday," "Tuesday," and all the other days of the week. There was a strange affinity always among the boy, the dog, and himself: where you saw one you saw the others. Uncle Fayette taught both boy and dog, to some extent, to "mind their manners," after the fashion in which he himself had been taught.

A RECOMMENDATION

One summer after the old fellow had been "bout forty" for well along toward 35 years, he said to me in the garden one day: "Lil Mis', I been thinking, looking backward over de years an' lookin' forward over de years to come, dat I ought to set down some day an' write myself a recommendation.

"Now you's out here in de garden wid yor li'l book whats you writes down where you plants yore flowers, an' you got yo' pencil wid you. S'pose you set down dere on de zinnia bed and write out my recommendation jes' like I tells it to you."

Nobody could refuse Uncle Fayette anything he asked, and always he asked so little. So I was glad to write on the order

blank in the back of my seed catalog these words just as he dictated.

“Been working hard ever since I was big enough. Never mistreated anybody. Always tried to pay my just and honest debts. Never been arrested in my life. Never been on a witness stand. Never had trouble wid my neighbors anywhere I ever lived. Never got drunk but once. Always asked for what I wanted and paid for what I got.

“Was born in Florence, Alabama, June 22, 1861. Named after de ol’ General Lafayette. Mother and I left Florence in 1863. Went to Pulaski. Raised up in Pulaski until I was 20 years old. Then went to Lawrence County. Have been a citizen of Maury County for 33 years.

“To the readers of this: receive my thanks for the time you have consumed in reading this notice.

“Younger generation might take pattern from de old heads. Be sure to cultivate de masses of ol’ people. You’ll be better off by hit. Very well satisfied wid life as I have lived it. Always tried to live obedient, have manners, and respect, and be trustworthy.

“Things I couldn’t buy hones’ I let alone—I have bought things on credit but I always got ’em paid for somehow.

“I don’ bother other folks an’ dey don’ bother me.

“I always try to tell de truth an’ I been honest.

“Anybody that wants to know more about my record can jus’ write to Alabama, or Giles County, or Lawrence County, or Maury County.

“An’ if anybody want to dispute dis record an’ prove otherwise I will give him 25 cents or they can give me 25 cents.”

Thus, in his 75th year Uncle Fayette summed up his “recommendation,” his record, his “yardstick” for living, and his philosophy. And may I say that I don’t think any 25-cent pieces ever changed hands. His “recommendation” was accepted by those who knew him.

The following Christmas, 1935, he went to Louisville to spend the holidays with his brother. He became ill and never returned to Tennessee. In the spring of the year he went to that “Far Country” and entered the service of Old Master himself.

If there was a stronger term in our language than Christian Gentleman, I’d use it for him. If there were words in my vocabulary to eulogize him I would do that. But there aren’t, nor do I feel he would wish it.

I can just tell about these little aspects of him I knew, and let you know where he is, so that when you knock at the Gate you will know the identity of the Precious Black Angel sitting at the right of “Ol Marsa, De Lawd,” at the foot of the Great White Throne, or sitting on the Heavenly Woodpile, whittling thoughtfully and puffing on a corncob pipe.



October Days

Let those who will, sing of September—September in the Rain.
My song, if I could sing, would be of October—October in the

Sun—that honey-colored, autumn-flavored, Indian-summer sun!

Of all months, October is to me most satisfying. April indeed is beautiful, thrilling; April is a month of promise. But October is a month of fulfillment, of completion, of maturity.

April's buds are October's fruit. April's tender mossy grass is October's cured hay. And the timid green shoots that spring from grains of corn planted in April are tall, husky stalks, heavily laden in October. Walking through a cornfield at this time of year one can hear the stalks and leaves whispering, chuckling over the secrets that summer has put in their ears.

In April the earth seems like a bride—with showers for her veil and plum blossoms for her coronet. And “the sun is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber rejoicing as a strong man to run a race.”

In October the earth is a matron, a happy, smiling mother. She and the sun are parents of a large family—buxom harvests, stalwart crops.

Not least among the joys of being a country woman is the privilege of living neighbor to Earth and Sun with their large varied and supremely interesting family.

Anyone who has walked in Tennessee woods and fields in October knows well that—

To him who, in the love of Nature, holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language:...¹

¹ “Thanatopsis,” by William Cullen Bryant

Purposely to hold communion with her visible forms, and to learn their various language, our family took frequent walks in the woods and fields in October.

We weren't sentimental about those walks. We didn't talk a great deal about them; didn't plan them; didn't make picnics of them; and didn't go dutifully or from habit. We just went walking—sometimes singly, sometimes by twos, sometimes by threes, or all together; sometimes the family, sometimes with guests or neighbors.

We didn't philosophize orally about those walks, but deep down within us there was always an unspoken understanding. We knew well that walks in woods and fields, these close associations with the children of Earth and Sun, put something into the souls of human beings that can be had from nowhere else we know. Nature does much for man, if man permits.

It is not just tall trees and tanglefoot; nor goldenrod framing a field; not the bright red of sumac, nor dogwood berries making faded leaves look greener; not haws hanging high; nor wild grapes in heavy handfuls, nor pink smart weed nor white ageratum—it's not just the showier things, nor the more fragrant or flavorful. Nor is it the live things, birds, bugs, beasts, although every ant or grasshopper has a lesson if we'll only look and heed, and so has every bug and butterfly, every blade of grass, and even the lowly morning glory that tangles itself with the corn. There are lessons of faith, hope, good cheer in them all.

The trees in early October remind me of men and women in middle age. They hold their growth at a standstill for several days and seem to glance back at summer and peer forward at winter. Then, finally, their decision is made. Almost overnight they plunge into their last riot of beauty—sing their swan song of color before taking on their slim black and lacy garments of winter.

To me the morning glory seems the greatest hope of them all. Right up to the day before frost we can see morning glory seedlings putting up tender shoots of green, each holding up its two little hands as though imploring for a few more days in which to make blooms and seeds.

Meanwhile the older morning-glory plants, those climbing over fences and twining around cornstalks are not losing time. They don't speculate on when frost will come; they keep right on opening new blooms every morning, and trying to make as many seeds as possible while the sun does shine.

Has man ever painted a picture that can compare with the sight of dew-touched morning glory vines decking brown cornfields with pink, blue, and white blossoms? Not only does nature "paint" this picture, she frames it then with goldenrod and adds touches of autumn leaves and autumn weeds as highlights. Nature is indeed a lavish artist.

I remember one autumn particularly, it seems we had been unusually busy. We had stayed out of them as long as we could, those October woods, so on the last Saturday of the month we

shut our eyes and turned deaf ears to the fact that there was so much to do, had an early mid-day dinner, gathered up bags and buckets, and hiked off to the woods.

There was a large hill near our house, which (although we have never paid a nickel's worth of taxes, insurance, interest, or rent on it) gave us each year and each season more pleasure than it ever gave its non-resident owner. We could see it from our farm-kitchen window, watch it change from month to month—white and black in winter; pale green, white, and reddish lavender in spring; dark green in summer; and red, dark green, and gold in autumn. Always when we felt a special need for exercise or inspiration we climbed to the top of Stone's hill, mounted an old charred stump, on the very tippy-top of the hill, and there surveyed the horizon from all sides. We always felt that from the top of Stone's Hill we could see over the top of every other hill in sight. It gives one's morale a boost to be able to look over the tops of all the other neighboring hills.

In the spring when we made this special pilgrimage we'd watch for rare wild flowers for our wild flower garden—I found a dog-tooth violet blooming against an ash tree one season. It was so snug and secure among the tree's roots I couldn't and wouldn't disturb it; I merely marked the tree and went back each season after to hunt for it again, but we never could even find that same tree. We weren't very good woodsmen, but we had the joy of the hunt.

But this is about one particular afternoon—which was typical of others. In going to the hill we crossed a cut-over tobacco field. Talk about courage, those tobacco plants had had their heads cut off weeks before, but even after that they were trying to carry on and were trying to put on a party appearance. The fresh young leaves of the second growth were just that delicate, beautiful shade of green that only burley tobacco knows how to make in its “second childhood.” The few plants which had escaped the cutters’ knives were blooming with that shade of pink that only burley tobacco knows how to make in its maturity. The rich brown color of the dirt between the ribbon-like rows helped the interesting color scheme. As we crossed the field we observed that a tobacco field looks better when the year’s work is done and the crop is all in the barn—or better still when the crops have gone to market all in the baskets.

We crossed through a cornfield where the leaves seemed to be whispering among themselves. Now and then we thought we could hear a giggle, and then a small cackle of laughter. Corn leaves are not rude; they were not talking about us; I know, for I’ve heard them whisper and giggle that way when they didn’t know anyone was about. That’s just their way—or perhaps it’s just the wind’s way.

We climbed the squeaky old wire fence into the lane and followed the wagon road up and around the hill. The old road had been abandoned for years; the soil was all washed off and only the rocks were left—rocks of a million shapes and sizes,

weather-worn, gray, yellow, dingy white—they were all huddled together, bracing themselves as best they could to withstand the torrents of muddy water that rushed down the old road bed when it rained.

ROCKS AND RILLS

Walking up that old road bed I could sincerely say:

I love thy rocks and rills,
Thy woods and templed hills.²

“Rocks and rills”—beautiful words in themselves. They are brief and simple, but how full they are of meaning only God and nature lovers know.

There is something about a rock, something substantial, everlasting, that surpasses living things. Men may come and go. For all their sanitation, their progress, their brains, their gland experiments; their stay on earth is short and most uncertain.

Trees grow up and flourish for perhaps a century or two; then they go back to woods dirt. But there stands the rock. It doesn't grow. It doesn't experiment. It has neither brains nor glands. But it has something that men and trees have not—enough security to laugh at centuries, storms, progress, at wars and financial depressions. Indeed rocks do have something superior.

² “America,” by Samuel F. Smith

I love rocks in their natural settings, hugged tight by mosses, half buried in soil, nestled closely among the plant life that loves them best. Certainly that must be the way that rocks are happiest. The meanest things we mortals do to rocks, I think, is the way we have of digging them out of their sturdy beds, blasting or chiseling them into odd, regular, unnatural shapes, standing them on edge or on end, or sticking them together with mortar into ugly, regular formations—in short, trying to “civilize” them. Yes, man and dynamite are rock’s worst enemies, but it will be a long time, I think, before these enemies will conquer all our rocks.

Somehow I don’t believe that rocks like to be civilized any more than do rills. And a civilized rill, if you’ll agree with me, is almost a synonym for sewer.

But on up the hill we went. A young maple tree was spreading her gold and scarlet shawl over the brush of an abandoned fence row. A prim little cedar tree stood beside her, and on the other side of the cedar flared the rich crimson of a “frying size” dogwood tree. The three—maple, cedar, dogwood—seemed to be holding hands there dancing in the October breeze on the edge of the old road-bed turned stream-bed.

A tiny little cedar tree was trying to grow out of what was apparently a solid rock—she had “made her bed hard” but she was bravely staying with it, and thriving. Only a stout hearted little cedar could thrive among the hardships that surrounded that little tree. But we decided that afternoon that

if she continues with that same steady courage, if man, bugs, or disease don't interfere, she will finally break the heart of even that hard hearted solid rock.

Jack, walking on ahead, called us to see his discovery, a really beautiful bed of ripe prickly pears. The big flat leaves were spread out like innocent little cushions—but they didn't fool us. Those with pears on them looked like fat hands stuffed into green gloves with pink fingers sticking out and turning blue with cold.

Jack declared that he had heard that the pears were good to eat, and boy-like, he dared us to taste them. At first we refused, but Margaret declared that although she couldn't claim to be as brave as the man who ate the first oyster, she would try one if he would promise to pick all the briars off first.

Jack responded with pioneerish ingenuity—he pulled the pear off its prickly parent with two sticks, rolled it in the dirt, and then between two stones until it was well-polished of briars. So Margaret then had to keep her part of the bargain.

As Grandpa Adam once told, “She did eat and gave to me and I eat.” In fact we tasted all around. We liked the sweet-sour first taste, but not the sticky after taste.

Jack always scouted on ahead of the rest of us like a frisky hunting dog. And he made numerous discoveries that we might have missed. Once he called us off to the side of the rocky path to see a groundhog den, then a place “where foxes go under

the fence,” “a natural rock garden,” and a “good place for a spring.”

It always amused him that we didn’t recognize trees with their summer clothes off. The one we thought was an ash was really a linn, he said, and “anybody ought to tell an elm from a walnut.”

AIR THICK AS HONEY

Has it ever occurred to you that sunshine seems thicker in the fall than it does in the spring? On that October afternoon it seemed as thick as honey, and as rich in color. It even seemed to have what we might term a “rich, full-bodied flavor,” or maybe the air carried the flavor in the form of autumn woods fragrance. How we did enjoy it; and how we missed it as we moved on into the shadows on the north side of the hill; but there we found moss, lots of it, growing over the rocks and banks and tree roots and the fallen tree trunks. And how we enjoyed the crackle and crunch of dry leaves under our feet. The woods sounds that afternoon seemed to make almost a symphony—or what we understood as a symphony.

Margaret had just stopped to shake the dirt out of her tennis shoes; I was gathering up some abandoned snail-shell houses; Jack had climbed an old rotten snag to see if it had a squirrel den in it; and Dad came wending on up the hill. As we started on up to join him and came just over the rise, we all saw it at once—a flash of green and red and blue as beautiful and as

colorful as a picture. We all cried out in chorus, “Haws! Haws! Haws! Black Haws!”

I don’t know why they call them “black” haws for they are really blue. And the leaves that day were green in the middle and red all around. We supposed they were haws, at any rate we tasted them, and we didn’t get sick, so I supposed they were non-poisonous anyway. Dad really knew more woodcraft than any of the rest of us, and he said they looked like haws to him.

As though that were not enough we next discovered a whole colony of wild grapes growing in the top of a weak little sapling. I feared we would never be able to get them down, but Jack, with the thoughtlessness of youth, began shinning up the sapling, and Margaret yelled, “Ride him down, cowboy.” Dad grinned. I let him go, thinking that if he did fall he wouldn’t fall far, and the ground was soft with leaves to catch him. And the grapes did look good.

He didn’t have to ride the sapling down after all. It was a strong little tree, and he managed to get all he thought we would eat without going too far up. We left plenty for the ’possums to climb for and the foxes to wish for. But even then as we started off from the tree with our large bunches of grapes Margaret said we reminded her of the spies who were sent by Israel to spy out the land of Canaan when they came back with the fruit of the land. Jack said she and I would be CALEB and JOSHUA and he and Dad would be the other ten spies, that they were doing most of the scouting anyway.

We had hardly finished this bantering when, like a little Indian, Jack gave a sort of whoop, drew his knife, and galloped off through the bushes at the left.

“Now we’ll have some chewing gum!” he yelled back.

Margaret explained: “It must be slippery elm.” (No, we didn’t say “ellum,” even if we were real country “hicks.”)

PASSION FLOWER

But the joke was on Jack—he who knew his trees so well—it was just plain non-slip elm. To change the subject quickly and to keep us from laughing at him, he cut us all some sassafras bark and twigs to chew. That lasted until we came to a bed of apricots; you may not call them apricots, and neither would the fruit-store man. The poet calls the plant passion flower, and I understand that another name for it is okole or something like that—the fruit sometimes called passion fruit.

For a long time the passion flower was Tennessee’s State Flower. When I was a school girl in town I couldn’t understand why it was selected. At that time I would have understood well why the state flower was changed from okole to iris. But now and ever since I’ve been on the farm, and since I know the good old apricot vine first hand, I doubt if we could have had a more admirable plant for our emblem.

For one thing it seems really native. It comes in the most unexpected places, and stands any amount of abuse, but

continues to grow and spread, although not making too much of a nuisance of itself.

This plant we country people call the apricot is beautiful in leaf, strong in tendril, gorgeous in blossom, and delicious in fruit. To me it seems actually clever. Take its method of distributing seeds for example. Of course, it attracts insects to its blossom by both beauty and nectar, and thus accomplishes cross-pollination.

But why, you ask, does it produce such shriveled, ugly fruit?

Did you ever notice that there is a degree of ugliness that is attractive? Have you not known people who were so ugly that they fascinated you? The wild apricot figured that all out, probably without benefit of psychology. It probably said to itself:

“If I make myself very ugly, people will be curious as to what such an ugly ball could have inside and will open it just to see.”

Then on the inside she put an enticing odor so that one could not resist tasting the contents. She coated each seed with a delicious sweetness, then as a joker she put underneath the sweetness a tang of sourness, even to the point of bitterness.

The result is this, and just as she probably expected: you and I walk along and see that shriveled, brown, little ball hanging on the vine, we take, we taste, we walk along. As we get thirty or forty steps from the mother plant we begin to taste the

bitterness, then we spit out the seed—and the old apricot vine laughs in her leaves. We are doing just what she wanted us to do, leave that seed to come up next year far enough away from the mother plant that she can still watch it grow, but not close enough that it will be too crowded by the rest of the family. I nominate the Passion Flower as an emblem of shrewdness and wisdom.

We had just started to fill our buckets with apricots when Jack discovered a hickory tree; but the squirrels had found that first, so only faulty nuts were left. It mystified us to notice that they could know without looking inside which nuts had bad hearts. But they certainly knew, and bad nuts were the only ones they had left.

On up the hill we moved, as Margaret said, partly by “shank’s mares” (our feet) and “marrow-bone stages” (our knees); we crossed the bed that wild fern feathered so beautifully each spring; the little clearing where we gathered “chicken-fighter” violets in late winter; the rocky ledge where we found little blue-purple flowers we called wild delphinium; and the brush pile that protects the deep-set bulbs of scillia, which will send up spikes of lavender glory again next spring; and another rocky bed that will give us larkspur next summer—the seeds were sprouting and small plants were starting even then.

Nearby was another patch that promised fire-pinks, and not far away a place that would be a veritable garden of timid little wild anemones putting forth dainty blossoms to sway and nod

in spring breezes. We remembered as we passed the spot where we first found fairy lilies, as we called them, and nobody else has told us a better name. Farther up the hill we watched for signs of wild geraniums that would also be a glory of pink next spring. But those, together with the myriads and hoards of trillium and Jack-in-the-pulpits, were taking their late autumn naps.

DEVIL'S RIDING HORSE

Just then a gun boomed from the other side of the hill and I was tempted to start preaching about people who couldn't enjoy woods without a gun in hand, when Margaret discovered a "Devil's Riding Horse," as she called him, and I proudly introduced him as a "praying mantis."

As we watched him, the pious-looking old fellow started performing. He lifted his awkward, twig-like torso, turned his head about to look all around to see if everybody was watching, then apparently folded his hands to pray for us, or perhaps for the fellow on the other side of the hill who had fired the gun. Just then smarty Mr. Jack, as Margaret called him, rushed up and ground the pharisaical old insect into the ground with his heel.

"Don't you know," he said, pitying our ignorance, "that those things are poisonous. He'll kill you if he bites you, and he's bad luck to look at. Mrs. So-and-so's little boy told me."

Then I told my son some things that Mrs. So-and-so's little boy had perhaps never heard, and I told Jack he must "look

up” the insect when we got home, and learn that the praying mantis is really the friend of man, and not a poisonous enemy to anything except other insects. I supposed I was correct in this, but at any rate I did not want my boy to learn cruelty and superstition.

We were looking off across the beautiful valley below us when our dog flushed a covey of partridges right at our feet—hardly 3 yards from where we were standing. They certainly make you jump when they fly up that way so near.

I trusted my weight to a grape-vine swing, had my confidence betrayed, and tumbled to the ground. The children laughed, but I didn't mind. It wasn't far to fall and the ground was soft, so I rolled over and rested awhile.

We discovered a cornfield on the top of the hill, but too many wasps were apartment-hunting in that cornfield for us to be much interested in staying there long. We did each steal a pumpkin though—small ones for we were a long way from home. Margaret's was about the size, shape, and color of a bald-headed Chinese baby's head, Jack's would, he thought, make a horrible pumpkin face, and mine was destined for a pie or two. We told our consciences that we would take our neighbor a piece of the pie.

All the way up the hill and all the way down and still we never did find what we greatly wanted—a persimmon tree; but we planned to make another foraging trip to find that, for

Jack always knows where to find one—that is almost always, he says.

We found a spring that was whispering, chuckling, and singing to the mossy rocks all around it, and there we rested before starting on our homeward trek.

At last we reached home, pumpkins, grapes and all, tired and happy, but not quite satisfied—we never get enough of scouting around in autumn woods.



Washday Rainbows

Have we other joys of October?

Then, if ever, come perfect washdays!

I didn't really have to wash that day. The laundry bag was not more than three-fourths full. Usually I waited until it was packed down and overflowing before I took my board in hand, put its ridges under my knuckles, and bent my back to rubbing. But that day was such a perfect washday. Not too hot, nor too cold. Sun shining lazily down, and promising to shine all day. Tank full of soft rain water; plenty of home-made lye soap in the cellar—soap made in the dark of the moon in March and been aging ever since. Tubs just sitting around in the way, and old black kettle already perched up on three wagon wheel thimbles just ready for the fire to be started. Who could resist a washday like that? Not me, I'm sure.

By the time I had soaked, scrubbed, boiled, then rubbed the white clothes “out of boil,” and had run them through three rinse waters, one bluing and one extra, just because the day was so perfect, I decided that still I hadn’t enough clothes in wash to enjoy the day to the fullest; so I went into the house and brought out two blankets and an old quilt, and put them through. Believe it or not—mostly not, maybe.

Then came pants. I do despise washing pants, as a rule, but on a golden October day, with white and silver suds, crystal clear iridescent bubbles splashing up around my wrists and elbows, curling wood smoke smelling like incense that no cathedral ever knew, and the sun shining all day in a manner that sent soft thrills clean through (I know that may sound mushy, but you know sunshine does do that sometimes)—well, under circumstances like that I could almost enjoy washing pants.

I had set my tubs, as I always did when the weather was fit, so I could look right out on the garden, facing the corner where pink cosmos were waving like Cleopatra’s fans (in pictures—I never saw them in reality, of course), and where a bed of Michaelmas daisy spread itself out looking like a lavender cloud come to earth. A yellow blooming plant—I don’t know what it was, but it must have belonged to the pea or lupine family, it’s a weed in some places, but it’s pretty in our garden—well it was standing near enough to the lavender Michaelmas blooms to make them look all the more lavender.

At one edge of the garden was a row of asparagus flaunting green plumes and red berries to and fro in the gentle breezy breeze. Down across the valley I could see a herd of red white-faced cows congregated in one corner of a browning field. They made a perfect picture. The corn shocks in another field made another picture, and a field being sown to wheat was certainly a study in green and brown. In another direction I could see brown shocks of lespedeza dotting a dark tan stubble field, and beyond that the trees just turning—do you wonder I wouldn't give a snap for washing machines that take all the exercise out of washday, or indoor tubs that fit against the cellar walls and give no outlook on washday except the blank cellar walls. No sir, I like scenery and exercise and sweat with my laundering.

All day, or most of it, I rubbed and rinsed and rubbed and rinsed. I splashed suds to my heart's content in luxury of rainwater and lye soap. Then I spread the snowy whites, the blues and pinks and yellows all out in the sun to dry.

Yes, I guess cleanliness does come next to Godliness. That's why God put Monday next to Sunday. And that's why he gives us days when we can revel among the suds and see rainbows above them—or do you? I admit I don't always. It's just on certain days. October days for instance. When there's plenty of rain water and lye soap—made in the dark of the moon in March.



November Night

I was coming back from the mailbox one morning when I saw Jack making “seven-league” strides toward the barn with a hunk of bread in each hand.

“Where are you going with that bread?” I asked in a tone that any cook might use.

He didn’t slow down or shorten his stride but he called back over his shoulder, “Gonna feed my dog.”

“What do you mean ‘your’ dog? Here’s our dog with me.”

“I know, Mother, but this other one is a very special dog. He’s a stray and I just know he’s a huntin’ dog.”

“How do you know he’s a huntin’ dog if he’s a stray?”

“Well, he’s a houn’ and houn’s usually are huntin’ dogs.”

I heard strange noises from around the barn several times that afternoon, and I noticed strange maneuverings about the farm. But I didn’t, somehow, connect them with the stray dog.

That night during supper Neighbor-boy Joedy came in. And after he came it seemed that Jack had little appetite for supper. He and Joedy made some mysterious trips up and down stairs to Jack’s room. Then our dog began to get excited. He, too, had no appetite for supper.

Soon the gun was brought out, then the lantern, and the old hunting coats and caps. By that time I knew what we were in for. The stray dog was going to have a chance to show his “houn’ism.”

Dad had just settled himself down in an easy chair with a pan full of hickory nuts, a few after-supper apples, a newspaper, and a magazine. But I noticed as the boys were oiling the gun, he got up and stretched, zipped up his leather jacket and 'lowed' that if I didn't mind staying by myself he'd "walk a piece with the boys."

I didn't mind at all, but why should I? I 'lowed I might as well walk a piece, too. And so it was that the "spirit of the hunting hound" permeated every member of the family except Margaret, who was away in school, and the cats who were on a hunting expedition of their own in the store room.

November nights are just made for hunting—at least some of them are, and this was one of the best. It had rained that morning and then had brushed up a soft wind, not too strong nor too cold. Just right was everything.

We'd no sooner got into hunting togs and gathered up our lanterns, flashlights, and guns, and started out the back door, than we heard a soft whistling coming across the barley field. Our dog didn't even bark, so we knew it must be a friend. It was. His name was Claude. He's a Negro boy from a neighboring farm, and he'd brought his own gun and dog—not by accident. He'd heard by grapevine of the stray hound that must be a huntin' dog.

It was decided we'd take a try up in Mr. Younger's hollow, and as it was a "far piece for a woman to walk," we thought we'd better go in the car as far as we could.

STRANGE THINGS WERE HAPPENING

Into the old bus we packed; Jack and Dad and I on the front seat, Joedy, Claude, our dog, the hound, and Claude's dog, Pretty Boy, on the back seat. You'd have thought it would take a Secretary of State and a Nine-Power Conference to keep three strange dogs on one back seat from fighting; but one white "diplomat" and one black "diplomat" managed to keep the peace.

Strange things were happening that night. We'd no sooner turned into the lane by the mailbox than the car lights picked up two waiting figures. Folks don't do much walking or waiting in our lane at night, so we paused. The figures proved to be two more Negro boys, Roy and Willie B, who had also heard of "the stray houn' that must be a huntin' dog."

There wasn't room for the latest recruits inside the car, so they hung on the sides; anyone meeting our car in the lane that night could have thought we were wearing "ears"—that's what the extra passengers must have looked like in the car's silhouette.

When we got out of the car and started trekking out across a newly-plowed-and-planted rye field facing a night wind I was glad to be wearing heavy shoes and a wool sweater, but I didn't need to put my hands in my pockets—it was that kind of a night.

It was decided that as there was a woman in the party, some concession ought to be made—boys of 17 or thereabouts like

to concede to the feminine—so they made it up that Dad and I would walk along the easier path up through the hollow, while they climbed the big rough hill to the east and scared the 'coons and 'possums down. The dogs, of course, went with the boys, and Dad and I slowly picked our way up the hollow over the soft irregular clods.

The one word that describes that night better than any other word or string of words is that word “soft.” The ground was soft. The night wind was soft—the air so clean and newly-washed it seemed soft—the noises of the night were soft; near us crickets (or something) chirped and buzzed and whirred softly in the blackberry briars along the fence. The rustle of the leaves was soft as we stirred them with our feet. The voices of the boys talking, chuckling on the hillside, were soft as they came down across a weed patch to us—I never noticed before how beautiful adolescent voices could be until I heard those carefree black and white boys on a November night.

The fact is I almost felt poetic:

“Soft in the stilly night - -”

But that’s as far as I got with my poem; our dog interrupted it with a sharp yelp from somewhere to the northeast of us. The boys yelled. Dad did too—he’s that kind of a grown-up boy—and we all hastened toward the noisy dog. The hound did come down the path to meet us once and let me stroke his long silky ears—I thought at the time if we can’t make silk purses out of sows’ ears we might be able sometime to use hound ears.

But the man, boys, and dogs were not thinking of silk purses. By the time Dad and I had huffed and puffed up the hill to the tall twin beeches, the boys were already there trying to “pick up his eyes” with a lantern. Our dog sat proudly under the tree—as self-important as the ringmaster in a three-ring circus. The boys circled the tree with their lights, and Dad joined them—he knew he could shine his eyes if anyone could. So ’round they went and up shot the gleams of light. I found a soft spot on a rotten log, spread the game bag on it, sat down, hugged my knees, and played doubting Thomas for the party. Somebody has to do that, and it’s one thing I do very well on a hunting party.

I sat on the log, our dog sat under the tree, and the man and boys and lights went round and round—all of us looking up, seeing nothing, just hoping.

THE SCOFFER

Once we heard, or thought we heard, a noise in the tree. Leaves rustled, bark was scratched. “He’s coming down!” someone yelled, then all sounds ceased together—all sounds except the rustle of leaves on the ground, the “tree-bark” of the dog, and the “Hoo-oo-o-o! Hoo-oo-o-o!” of an owl on a far hill. Still no eyes could be “shined” in the tree. Once we thought we saw him looking down from the forks, but it must have been dew on leaves or a belated firefly roosting in the beech.

Finally we decided, or rather they did (I was the scoffer), that he must have crossed from the large beech to the smaller one. The lights were turned on that, but still no eyes. Then it was suggested that someone must go up. Jack came out of his boots—it took two boys to separate boots and boy—and then out of his coat, and up the tree he skinned. The lights were shined again to see if he could discover the varmint's outline against the trunk, in the forks, or on a high limb. Jack “thought” he saw him a time or two. Then he “thought” that he had discovered a solution to the whole mystery—he saw what looked like a hole in the tree—the varmint must be in the hollow.

That brought Dad's young blood into action. He'd climb the big tree. He came out of coat and shoes and in doing so he thought he stripped off a score of years—but I laughed at him—I was the scoffer, you know. Dad was determined to go up that tree. At least he was determined until he put his arms around the big trunk. They reached hardly halfway around, so Dad admitted that the tree was bigger than he was and calmed his determination, put on his coat and shoes again.

The masculine part of the party did hate to go away without bringing down the first coon that had been treed. I hated it, too, but I couldn't say anything, considering my role.

Finally we did give up, and we began to turn our eyes and ears about for the hound “that must be a hunting dog.” He still hadn't done anything to bark about. He'd been rustling around

in the leaves and weeds but had made very little vocal noise. The third dog, Pretty Boy, had been sitting on the log with me most of the time. I'm afraid that all told we weren't a very cooperative party.

We left the twin beeches and moved on through the bushes and undergrowth in some indiscernible direction. The only direction I could be sure of was up. The sky was beautiful—and yet, if you've ever seen a November sky through beech limbs you know that beautiful is not the word I need.

Looking up, it seemed that the sky was wearing a soft pearly gray “evening dress” with trimmings of black lace in intricate and irregular pattern. Close around us the young beech bushes tried to hold us back by stretching their slim, pointed, graceful fingers out across the path in the shimmering light of our lanterns—it was a night!

We tramped a while farther into the woods, stopped, and waited for the dogs to “speak.”

“That old hound will open up before long,” Dad promised. At last he did. I know now what men mean when they say a hound's voice is “opening up.” That hound sounded like hollering down a rain-barrel—even worse, it sounded like hollering down a whole big cistern. It made the woods ring, echo, and almost shake. Even the hoot owl hushed when the hound opened up.

But he wasn't a “hunting dog” for long. He soon “signed off” and gave the air to the owls again and to the rustle of leaves and the buzzing of bugs, and to our small chatter. It was an evening

full of waiting and listening. We'd find a clearing, spread out our sacks and coats to sit on. Wait a while and listen, then move on and wait and listen again.

At last Dad and I decided we might as well go home. The boys decided to go on. They rambled over two more hills and through two or three more hollows, but the biggest "game" they found that night was a truck stuck in the mud—they helped push it out, and came home.

It was a night, a great night. The hound that "ought to be a hunting dog" is still hunting, I suppose, unless he has found his master. His ears might make silk purses, but I don't think he'd be useful for anything else. Dad admitted that he can't climb like he "used to could." Our dog admitted that he might have been mistaken about the coon. Jack promised to let Joedy and the Negro boys know by "grapevine telegraph" next time a stray hunting dog turned up. But the only good thing the game sack did that night was to soften the seat of the scoffer.



The Turning of the Lane

One morning, with the farm's newest pup at heel, I started to the mailbox. Going there was always a highlight of the day's adventures for both the pup and me. I don't know what he thought he'd find on the way there and back. I never knew what

the mail carrier would bring me when he came over the hill and around the bend, and so the mailbox trip was high adventure.

We were early; we sat for a while and waited. We walked up the road a piece, then down the road a piece, then we sat down again and waited. Suddenly I heard a shout. The pup's ears pricked up and I suppose mine did, too. It was a man's gruff voice and the sound was short, just one word. It wasn't "Help!" I was sure of that, but beyond that certainty I was puzzled.

The sound came from one of the Stone family's fields, just across the high fence row and not too far from the road. What could men be doing over there? The Stones had all moved away, and the place was vacant.

Wondering what was on the other side of that fence I thought of "Mammy" Stone, how she hated that overgrown row. She never could see what went on down the road, who passed by, or when the mailman came. But again I wondered: what could a strange man be doing over in the Stones' fields? Mammy would say often: "If I had the strength of fifty men I'd clean up that fence row." But she didn't.

The pup and I went on up to the gate, really just a gap in the row, and peered into the field. Sure enough, there was a strange man, and furthermore he was doing a strange thing.

Dressed in khaki, with a terrapin-top hat, he was leaning slightly over a tripod, holding his hands outstretched. As the hands moved slowly up and down, I glanced across the field to

the far fence row and there was another man. He was holding up a red and white striped pole.

There could be no doubt about it; they were surveyors! What on earth could it mean? Had the heirs decided to sell the old Stone place? Impossible! Were we at last going to get a new road across the hill, giving us easier access to the highway? Maybe a railroad would be coming our way.

Curiosity got the better of me. I walked up to the near man and said, "I don't mean to be meddling, but what on earth are you doing?"

"Prospecting for phosphate," was the answer.

Then I said, lightly, "Well, when you get through here come on over to our place," and he answered seriously.

"Thank you, we will."

And they did.

Of course, there was the matter of signing some papers, drawing up an option and things I like that. I had my fingers crossed and my doubts working throughout the whole deal.

Following the surveyors came the real prospectors, whole gangs of men with joints of pipe and 4-inch augers. The surveyors had measured the land, "chained" it, and put stakes every 100 feet each way. All the "real" prospectors had to do was to bore a hole by the side of the stake, bore down, and take a sample of the soil, put the sample into a bag and write the number of the stake on a card. Other men came around and picked up the samples to have them tested.

Alex and I had the fidgets. We'd prowl about from one hole to another, questioning the men. "What are you finding? Does it look pretty good? How deep is that hole? Is this sample as good as the last?"

Then came the day at the lawyer's office, where he sat back in his chair and read pages and pages of whereases and wherefores. Finally we were handed one small piece of paper, a check that meant we could pay off the mortgage. We could buy a new farm over on the highway and build just exactly the house we wanted—not thirteen barn-like rooms "lovely to look at but the dickens to live in," but a few small rooms and a bath and electricity and there would be hollyhocks by the door next summer. Our love might get to a cottage after all.

Somehow I had never thought that those pesky phosphate pebbles I had chopped among when I planted the first cabbage patch might ever come in so handy one day.