

Cobb Irvin Shrewsbury

**The Abandoned Farmers. His
Humorous Account of a
Retreat from the City...**



Irvin Cobb

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Retreat from the City to the Farm**

«Public Domain»

Cobb I.

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Cobb Irvin S. Irvin Shrewsbury The Abandoned Farmers His Humorous Account of a Retreat from the City to the Farm

THE ABANDONED FARMERS

CHAPTER I. WHICH REALLY IS A PREFACE IN DISGUISE

It is the inclination of the average reader to skip prefaces. For this I do not in the least blame him. Skipping the preface is one of my favorite literary pursuits. To catch me napping a preface must creep up quietly and take me, as it were, unawares.

But in this case sundry prefatory remarks became necessary. It was essential that they should be inserted into this volume in order that certain things might be made plain. The questions were: How and where? After giving the matter considerable thought I decided to slip them in right here, included, as they are, with the body of the text and further disguised by masquerading themselves under a chapter heading, with a view in mind of hoodwinking you into pursuing the course of what briefly I have to say touching on the circumstances attending the production of the main contents. Let me explain:

Chapter II, coming immediately after this one, was written first of all; written as an independent contribution to American letters. At the time of writing it I had no thought that out of it, subsequently, would grow material for additional and supplementary offerings upon the same general theme and inter-related themes. It had a basis of verity, as all things in this life properly should have, but I shall not attempt to deny that largely it deals with what more or less is figurative and fanciful. The incident of the finding of the missing will in the ruins of the old mill is a pure figment of the imagination; so, too, the passage relating to the search for the lost heir (Page 55) and the startling outcome of that search.

Three years later, actual events in the meantime having sufficiently justified the taking of such steps, I prepared the matter which here is presented in Chapters III, IV and V, inclusive. Intervened then a break of approximately two years more, when the tale was completed substantially in its present form. In all of these latter installments I adhered closely to facts, merely adding here and there sprinklings of fancy, like dashes of paprika on a stew, in order to give, as I fondly hoped, spice to my recital.

One of the prime desires now, in consolidating the entire narrative within these covers, is to round out, from inception to finish, the record of our strange adventures in connection with our quest for an abandoned farm and on our becoming abandoned farmers, trusting that others, following our examples, may perhaps profit in some small degree by our mistakes as here set forth and perhaps ultimately when their dreams have come true, too, share in that proud joy of possession which is ours. Another object, largely altruistic in its nature, is to afford opportunity for the reader, by comparison of the chronological sub-divisions into which the story falls, to decide whether with the passage of time, my style of writing shows a tendency toward improvement or an increasing and enhanced faultiness. Those who feel inclined to write me upon the subject are notified that the author is most sensible in this regard, being ever ready to welcome criticism, provided only

the criticism be favorable in tone. Finally there is herewith confessed a third motive, namely, an ambition that a considerable number of persons may see their way clear to buy this book.

Quite aside from my chief aim as a writer, which is from time to time to enrich our native literature, I admit to sharing with nearly all writers and with practically all publishers a possibly selfish but not altogether unnatural craving. When I have prepared the material for a volume I desire that the volume may sell, which means royalties, which means cash in hand. The man who labors for art's sake alone nearly always labors for art's sake alone; at least usually he appears to get very little else out of his toil while he is alive. After his death posterity may enshrine him, but posterity, as some one has aptly said, butters no parsnips. I may state that I am almost passionately fond of my parsnips, well-buttered. My publisher is also one of our leading parsnip-lovers. These facts should be borne in mind by prospective purchasers of the book.

I believe that is about all I would care to say in the introductory phase. With these few remarks, therefore, the attention of the reader respectfully is directed to Chapter II and points beyond.

CHAPTER II. THE START OF A DREAM

For years it was the dream of our life – I should say our lives, since my wife shared this vision with me – to own an abandoned farm. The idea first came to us through reading articles that appeared in the various magazines and newspapers telling of the sudden growth of what I may call the aban-doned-farm industry.

It seemed that New England in general – and the state of Connecticut in particular – was thickly speckled with delightful old places which, through overcultivation or ill-treatment, had become for the time being sterile and non-productive; so that the original owners had moved away to the nearby manufacturing towns, leaving their ancestral homesteads empty and their ancestral acres idle. As a result there were great numbers of desirable places, any one of which might be had for a song. That was the term most commonly used by the writers of these articles – abandoned farms going for a song. Now, singing is not my forte; still, I made up my mind that if such indeed was the case I would sing a little, accompanying myself on my bank balance, and win me an abandoned farm.

The formula as laid down by the authorities was simple in the extreme: Taking almost any Connecticut town for a starting point, you merely meandered along an elm-lined road until you came to a desirable location, which you purchased for the price of the aforesaid song. This formality being completed, you spent a trivial sum in restoring the fences, and so on, and modernizing the interior of the house; after which it was a comparatively easy task to restore the land to productiveness by processes of intensive agriculture – details procurable from any standard book on the subject or through easy lessons by mail. And so presently, with scarcely any trouble or expense at all, you were the possessor of a delightful country estate upon which to spend your declining years. It made no difference whether you were one of those persons who had never to date declined anything of value; there was no telling when you might start in.

I could shut my eyes and see the whole delectable prospect: Upon a gentle eminence crowned with ancient trees stood the rambling old manse, filled with marvelous antique furniture, grandfather's clocks dating back to the whaling days, spinning wheels, pottery that came over on the *Mayflower*, and all those sorts of things. Round about were the meadows, some under cultivation and some lying fallow, the latter being dotted at appropriate intervals with fallow deer.

At one side of the house was the orchard, the old gnarly trees crooking their bent limbs as though inviting one to come and pluck the sun-kissed fruit from the burdened bough; at the other side a purling brook wandering its way into a greenwood copse, where through all the golden day sang the feathered warblers indigenous to the climate, including the soft-billed Greenwich thrush, the Peabody bird, the Pettingill bird, the red worsted pulse-warmer, and others of the commoner varieties too numerous to mention.

At the back were the abandoned cotes and byres, with an abandoned rooster crowing lustily upon a henhouse, and an abandoned bull calf disporting himself in the clover of the pasture. At the front was a rolling vista undulating gently away to where above the tree-tops there rose the spires of a typical New England village full of old line Republicans and characters suitable for putting into short stories. On beyond, past where a silver lake glinted in the sunshine, was a view either of the distant Sound or the distant mountains. Personally I intended that my establishment should be so placed as to command a view of the Sound from the east windows and of the mountains from the west windows. And all to be had for a song! Why, the mere thought of it was enough to make a man start taking vocal culture right away.

Besides, I had been waiting impatiently for a long time for an opportunity to work out several agricultural projects of my own. For example, there was my notion in regard to the mulberry. The mulberry, as all know, is one of our most abundant small fruits; but many have objected to it on

account of its woolly appearance and slightly caterpillary taste. My idea was to cross the mulberry on the slippery elm – pronounced, where I came from, ellum – producing a fruit which I shall call the mulellum. This fruit would combine the health-giving qualities of the mulberry with the agreeable smoothness of the slippery elm; in fact, if my plans worked out I should have a berry that would go down so slick the consumer could not taste it at all unless he should eat too many of them and suffer from indigestion afterward.

Then there was my scheme for inducing the common chinch bug to make chintz curtains. If the silk worms can make silk why should not the chinch bug do something useful instead of wasting his energies in idle pursuits? This is what I wished to know. And why should this man Luther Burbank enjoy a practical monopoly of all these propositions? That was the way I looked at it; and I figured that an abandoned farm would make an ideal place for working out such experiments as might come to me from time to time.

The trouble was that, though everybody wrote of the abandoned farms in a broad, general, allur-ing way, nobody gave the exact location of any of them. I subscribed for one of the monthly publications devoted to country life along the Eastern seaboard and searched assiduously through its columns for mention of abandoned farms. The owners of most of the country places that were advertised for sale made mention of such things as fourteen master's bedrooms and nine master's baths – showing undoubtedly that the master would be expected to sleep oftener than he bathed – sunken gardens and private hunting preserves, private golf links and private yacht landings.

In nearly every instance, also, the advertisement was accompanied by a halftone picture of a structure greatly resembling the new county court house they are going to have down at Paducah if the bond issue ever passes. This seemed a suitable place for holding circuit court in, or even fiscal court, but it was not exactly the kind of country home that we had pictured for ourselves. As my wife said, just the detail of washing all those windows would keep the girl busy fully half the time. Nor did I care to invest in any sunken gardens. I had sufficient experience in that direction when we lived in the suburbs and permanently invested about half of what I made in our eight-by-ten flower bed in an effort to make it produce the kind of flowers that the florists' catalogues described. You could not tell us anything about that subject – we knew where a sunken garden derives its name. We paid good money to know.

None of the places advertised in the monthly seemed sufficiently abandoned for our purposes, so for a little while we were in a quandary. Then I had a bright thought. I said to myself that undoubtedly abandoned farms were so cheap the owners did not expect to get any real money for them; they would probably be willing to take something in exchange. So I began buying the evening papers and looking through them in the hope of running across some such item as this:

To Exchange – Abandoned farm, centrally located, with large farmhouse, containing all antique furniture, barns, outbuildings, family graveyard – planted – orchard, woodland, fields – unplanted – for a collection of postage stamps in album, an amateur magician's outfit, a guitar with book of instructions, a safety bicycle, or what have you? Address Abandoned, South Squantum Center, Connecticut.

I found no such offers, however; and in view of what we had read this seemed stranger still. Finally I decided that the only safe method would be by first-hand investigation upon the spot. I would go by rail to some small but accessible hamlet in the lower part of New England. On arriving there I personally would examine a number of the more attractive abandoned farms in the immediate vicinity and make a discriminating selection. Having reached this conclusion I went to bed and slept peacefully – or at least I went to bed and did so as soon as my wife and I had settled one point that came up unexpectedly at this juncture. It related to the smokehouse. I was in favor of turning the smokehouse into a study or workroom for myself. She thought, though, that by knocking the walls out and altering the roof and building a pergola on to it, it would make an ideal summer house in which to serve tea and from which to view the peaceful landscape of afternoons.

We argued this back and forth at some length, each conceding something to the other's views; and finally we decided to knock out the walls and alter the roof and have a summer house with a pergola in connection. It was after we reached this compromise that I slept so peacefully, for now the whole thing was as good as settled. I marveled at not having thought of it sooner.

It was on a bright and peaceful morning that I alighted from the train at North Newburybunkport.

Considering that it was supposed to be a typical New England village, North Newburybunkport did not appear at first glance to answer to the customary specifications, such as I had gleaned from my reading of novels of New England life. I had expected that the platform would be populated by picturesque natives in quaint clothes, with straws in their mouths and all whittling; and that the depot agent would wear long chin whiskers and say "I vum!" with much heartiness at frequent intervals. Right here I wish to state that so far as my observations go the native who speaks these words about every other line is no longer on the job. Either I Vum the Terrible has died or else he has gone to England to play the part of the typical American millionaire in American plays written by Englishmen.

Instead of the loafers, several chauffeurs were idling about the station and a string of automobiles was drawn up across the road. Just as I disembarked there drove up a large red bus labeled: Sylvan Dale Summer Hotel, European and American Plans. The station agent also proved in the nature of a disappointment. He did not even say "I swan" or "I cal'late!" or anything of that nature. He wore a pink in his buttonhole and his hair was scalloped up off his forehead in what is known as the lion tamer's roach. Approaching, I said to him:

"In what direction should I go to find some of the abandoned farms of this vicinity? I would prefer to go where there is a good assortment to pick from."

He did not appear to understand, so I repeated the question, at the same time offering him a cigar.

"Bo," he said, "you've sure got me winging now. You'd better ask Tony Magnito – he runs the garage three doors up the street from here on the other side. Tony does a lot of driving round the country for suckers that come up here, and he might help you."

To reach the garage I had to cross the road, dodging several automobiles in transit, and then pass two old-fashioned New England houses fronting close up to the sidewalk. One had the sign of a teahouse over the door, and in the window of the other, picture postcards, birch-bark souvenirs and standard varieties of candy were displayed for sale.

Despite his foreign-sounding name, Mr. Magnito spoke fair English – that is, as fair English as any one speaks who employs the Manhattan accent in so doing.

Even after he found out that I did not care to rent a touring car for sightseeing purposes at five dollars an hour he was quite affable and accommodating; but my opening question appeared to puzzle him just as in the case of the depot agent.

"Mister," he said frankly, "I'm sorry, but I don't seem to make you. What's this thing you is looking for? Tell me over again slow."

Really the ignorance of these villagers regarding one of their principal products – a product lying, so to speak, at their very doors and written about constantly in the public prints – was ludicrous. It would have been laughable if it had not been deplorable. I saw that I could not indulge in general trade terms. I must be painfully explicit and simple.

"What I am seeking" – I said it very slowly and very distinctly – "is a farm that has been deserted, so to speak – one that has outlived its usefulness as a farm proper, and everything like that!"

"Oh," he says, "now I get you! Why didn't you say that in the first place? The place you're looking for is the old Parham place, out here on the post road about a mile. August'll take good care of you – that's his specialty."

“August?” I inquired. “August who?”

“August Weinstopper – the guy who runs it,” he explained. “You must have known August if you lived long in New York. He used to be the steward at that big hotel at Broadway and Forty-second; that was before he came up here and opened up the old Parham place as an automobile roadhouse. He’s cleaning up about a thousand a month. Some class to that mantrap! They’ve got an orchestra, and nothing but vintage goods on the wine card, and dancing at all hours. Any night you’ll see forty or fifty big cars rolling up there, bringing swell dames and-”

I judge he saw by my expression that he was on a totally wrong tack, because he stopped short.

“Say, mister,” he said, “I guess you’d better step into the post-office here – next door – and tell your troubles to Miss Plummer. She knows everything that’s going on round here – and she ought to, too, seeing as she gets first chance at all the circulars and postal cards that come in. Besides, I gotter be changing that gasoline sign – gas has went up two cents a gallon more.”

Miss Plummer was sorting mail when I appeared at her wicket. She was one of those elderly, spinsterish-looking, kittenish females who seem in an intense state of surprise all the time. Her eyebrows arched like croquet wickets and her mouth made O’s before she uttered them.

“Name, please?” she said twitteringly.

I told her.

“Ah,” she said in the thrilled tone of one who is watching a Fourth of July skyrocket explode in midair. The news seemed to please her.

“And the initials, please?”

“The initials are of no consequence. I do not expect any mail,” I said. “I want merely to ask you a question.”

“Indeed!” she said coyly. She said it as though I had just given her a handsome remembrance, and she cocked her head on one side like a bird – like a hen-bird.

“I hate to trouble you,” I went on, “but I have experienced some difficulty in making your townspeople understand me. I am looking for a certain kind of farm – a farm of an abandoned character.” At once I saw I had made a mistake.

“You do not get my meaning,” I said hastily. “I refer to a farm that has been deserted, closed up, shut down – in short, abandoned. I trust I make myself plain.”

She was still suffering from shock, however. She gave me a wounded-fawn glance and averted her burning face.

“The Prewitt property might suit your purposes – whatever they may be,” she said coldly over her shoulder. “Mr. Jabez Pickerel, of Pickerel & Pike, real-estate dealers, on the first corner above, will doubtless give you the desired information. He has charge of the Prewitt property.”

At last, I said to myself as I turned away, I was on the right track. Mr. Pickerel rose as I entered his place of business. He was a short, square man, with a brisk manner and a roving eye.

“I have been directed to you,” I began. He seized my hand and began shaking it warmly. “I have been told,” I continued, “that you have charge of the old Prewitt farm somewhere near here; and as I am in the market for an aban-” I got no farther than that.

“In one minute,” he shouted explosively – “in just one minute!”

Still clutching me by the hand, he rushed me pell-mell out of the place. At the curbing stood a long, low, rakish racing-model roadster, looking something like a high-powered projectile and something like an enlarged tailor’s goose. Leaping into this machine at one bound, he dragged me up into the seat beside him and threw on the power. Instantly we were streaking away at a perfectly appalling rate of speed – fully forty-five to fifty-five miles an hour I should say. You never saw anything so sudden in your life. It was exactly like a kidnaping. It was only by the exercise of great self-control that I restrained myself from screaming for help. I had the feeling that I was being abducted – for what purpose I knew not.

As we spun round a corner on two wheels, spraying up a long furrow of dust, the same as shown in pictures of the chariot race in Ben-Hur, a man with a watch in his hand and wearing a badge – a constable, I think – ran out of a house that had a magistrate's sign over it and threw up his hand authoritatively, as though to stop us; but my companion yelled something the purport of which I could not distinguish and the constable fell back. Glancing rearward over my shoulder I saw him halting another car bearing a New York license that did not appear to be going half so fast as we were.

In another second we were out of town, tearing along a country highway. Evidently sensing the alarm expressed by my tense face and strained posture, this man Pickerel began saying something in what was evidently intended to be a reassuring tone; but such was the roaring of the car that I could distinguish only broken fragments of his speech. I caught the words “unparalleled opportunity,” repeated several times – the term appeared to be a favorite of his – and “marvelous proposition.” Possibly I was not listening very closely anyhow, my mind being otherwise engaged. For one thing I was surmising in a general sort of way upon the old theory of the result when the irresistible force encounters the immovable object. I was wondering how long it would be before we hit something solid and whether it would be possible afterward to tell us apart. His straw hat also made me wonder. I had mine clutched in both hands and even then it fluttered against my bosom like a captive bird, but his stayed put. I think yet he must have had threads cut in his head to match the convolutions of the straw and screwed his hat on, like a nut on an axle.

I have a confused recollection of rushing with the speed of the tornado through rows of trees; of leaping from the crest of one small hill to the crest of the next small hill; of passing a truck patch with such velocity that the lettuce and tomatoes and other things all seemed to merge together in a manner suggestive of a well-mixed vegetable salad.

Then we swung off the main road in between the huge brick columns of an ornate gateway that stood alone, with no fence in connection. We bumpily traversed a rutted stretch of cleared land; and then with a jar and a jolt we came to a pause in what appeared to be a wide and barren expanse.

As my heart began to throb with slightly less violence I looked about me for the abandoned farmhouse. I had conceived that it would be white with green blinds and that it would stand among trees. It was not in sight; neither were the trees. The entire landscape presented an aspect that was indeed remarkable. Small numbered stakes, planted in double lines at regular intervals, so as to form aisles, stretched away from us in every direction. Also there were twin rows of slender sticks planted in the earth in a sort of geometric pattern. Some were the size of switches. Others were almost as large as umbrella handles and had sprouted slightly. A short distance away an Italian was steering a dirtscraper attached to a languid mule along a sort of dim roadway. There were no other living creatures in sight. Right at my feet were two painted and lettered boards affixed at cross angles to a wooden upright. The legend on one of these boards was: Grand Concourse. The inscription on the other read: Nineteenth Avenue West. Repressing a gasp, I opened my mouth to speak.

“Ahem!” I said. “There has been some mistake – ”

“There can be no mistake!” he shouted enthusiastically. “The only mistake possible is not to take advantage of this magnificent opportunity while it is yet possible to do so. Just observe that view!” He waved his arm in the general direction of the horizon from northwest to southeast. “Breathe this air! As a personal favor to me just breathe a little of this air!” He inhaled deeply himself as though to show me how, and I followed suit, because after that ride I needed to catch up with my regular breathing.

“Thank you!” I said gratefully when I had finished breathing. “But how about – ”

“Quite right!” he cried, beaming upon me admiringly. “Quite right! I don't blame you. You have a right to know all the details. As a business man you should ask that question. You were about to say: But how about the train service? Ah, there spoke the true business man, the careful

investor! Twenty fast trains a day each way – twenty, sir! Remember! And as for accessibility – well, accessibility is simply no name for it! Only two or three minutes from the station. You saw how long it took us to get here to-day? Well, then, what more could you ask? Right here,” he went on, pointing, “is the country club – a magnificent thing!”

I looked, but I didn’t see anything except a hole in the ground about fifty feet from us.

“Where?” I asked. “I don’t see it.”

“Well,” he said, “this is where it is going to be. You automatically become a member of the country club; in fact, you are as good as a member now! And right up there at the corner of Lincoln Boulevard and Washington Parkway, where that scraper is, is the public library – the site for it! You’ll be crazy about the public library! When we get back I’ll let you run over the plans for the public library while I’m fixing up the papers. Oh, ‘my friend, how glad I am you came while there was yet time!’”

I breasted the roaring torrent of his pouring language.

“One minute,” I begged of him – “One minute, if you please! I am obliged to you for the interest you take in me, a mere stranger to you; but there has been a misunderstanding. I wanted to see the Prewitt place.”

“This is the Prewitt place,” he said.

“Yes,” I said; “but where is the house? And why all this – why all these-” I indicated by a wave of my hand what I meant.

“Naturally,” he explained, “the house is no longer here. We tore it away – it was old; whereas everything here will be new, modern and up-to-date. This is – or was – the Prewitt place, now better known as Homecrest Heights, the Development Ideal!” Having begun to capitalize his words, he continued to do so. “The Perfect Addition! The Suburb Superb! Away From the City’s Dust and Heat! Away From Its Glamor and Clamor! Into the Open! Into the Great Out-of-Doors! Back to the Soil! Villa Plots on Easy Terms! You Furnish the Birds, We Furnish the Nest! The Place For a Business Man to Rear His Family! You Are Married? You Have a Wife? You Have Little Ones?”

“Yes,” I said, “one of each – one wife and one little one.”

“Ah!” he cried gladly. “One Little One – How Sweet! You Love Your Little One – Ah, Yes! Yes! You Desire to Give Your Little One a Chance? You Would Give Her Congenial Surroundings – Refined Surroundings? You Would Inculcate in Her While Young the Love of Nature?” He put an entire sentence into capitals now: “Give Your Little One a Chance! That is All I Ask of You!”

He had me by both lapels. I thought he was going to kneel to me in pleading. I feared he might kiss me. I raised him to his feet. Then his manner changed – it became domineering, hectoring, almost threatening.

I will pass briefly over the events of the succeeding hour, including our return to his lair or office. Accounts of battles where all the losses fall upon one side are rarely interesting to read about anyway. Suffice it to say that at the last minute I was saved. It was a desperate struggle though. I had offered the utmost resistance at first, but he would surely have had his way with me – only that a train pulled in bound for the city just as he was showing me, as party of the first part, where I was to sign my name on the dotted line A. Even then, weakened and worn as I was, I should probably not have succeeded in beating him off if he had not been hampered by having a fountain pen in one hand and the documents in the other. At the door he intercepted me; but I tackled him low about the body and broke through and fled like a hunted roebuck, catching the last car just as the relief train pulled out of the station. It was a close squeeze, but I made it. The thwarted Mr. Pickerel wrote me regularly for some months thereafter, making mention of My Little One in every letter; but after a while I took to sending the letters back to him unopened, and eventually he quit.

I reached home along toward evening. I was tired, but I was not discouraged. I reported progress on the part of the committee on a permanent site, but told my wife that in order to find exactly what we wanted it would be necessary for us to leave the main-traveled paths. It was now

quite apparent to me that the abandoned farm-seeker who stuck too closely to the railroad lines was bound to be thrown constantly in contact with those false and feverish metropolitan influences which, radiating from the city, have spread over the country like the spokes of a wheel or an upas tree, or a jauga-naut, or something of that nature. The thing to do was to get into an automobile and go away from the principal routes of travel, into districts where the abandoned farms would naturally be more numerous.

This solved one phase of the situation – we now knew definitely where to go. The next problem was to decide upon some friend owning an automobile. We fixed upon the Winsells. They are charming people! We are devoted to the Winsells. They were very good friends of ours when they had their small four-passenger car; but since they sold the old one and bought a new forty-horse, seven-passenger car, they are so popular that it is hard to get hold of them for holidays and week-ends.

Every Saturday – nearly – some one of their list of acquaintances is calling them up to tell of a lovely spot he has just heard about, with good roads all the way, both coming and going; but after a couple of disappointments we caught them when they had an open date. Over the telephone Winsell objected that he did not know anything about the roads up in Connecticut, but I was able to reassure him promptly on that score. I told him he need not worry about that – that I would buy the road map myself. So on a fair Saturday morning we started.

The trip up through the extreme lower end of the state of New York was delightful, being marred by only one or two small mishaps. There was the trifling incident of a puncture, which delayed us slightly; but fortunately the accident occurred at a point where there was a wonderful view of the Croton Lakes, and while Winsell was taking off the old tire and adjusting a new one we sat very comfortably in the car, enjoying Nature's panorama.

It was a little later on when we hit a dog. It seemed to me that this dog merely sailed, yowling, up into the air in a sort of long curve, but Winsell insisted that the dog described a parabola. I am very glad that in accidents of this character it is always the victims that describe the parabola. I know I should be at a complete loss to describe one myself. Unless it is something like the boomerang of the Australian aborigines I do not even know what a parabola is. Nor did I dream until then that Winsell understood the dog language. However, those are but technical details.

After we crossed the state line we got lost several times; this was because the country seemed to have a number of roads the road map omitted, and the road map had many roads the country had left out. Eventually, though, we came to a district of gently rolling hills, dotted at intervals with those neat white-painted villages in which New England excels; and between the villages at frequent intervals were farmhouses. Abandoned ones, however, were rarer than we had been led to expect. Not only were these farms visibly populated by persons who appeared to be permanently attached to their respective localities, but at many of them things were offered for sale – such as home-made pastry, souvenirs, fresh poultry, antique furniture, brass door-knockers, milk and eggs, hand-painted crockery, table board, garden truck, molasses taffy, laundry soap and livestock.

At length, though, when our necks were quite sore from craning this way and that on the watch for an abandoned farm that would suit us, we came to a very attractive-looking place facing a lawn and flanked by an orchard. There was a sign fastened to an elm tree alongside the fence. The sign read: For Information Concerning This Property Inquire Within.

To Winsell I said:

“Stop here – this is without doubt the place we have been looking for!”

Filled – my wife and I – with little thrills of anticipation, we all got out. I opened the gate and entered the yard, followed by Winsell, my wife and his wife. I was about halfway up the walk when a large dog sprang into view, at the same time showing his teeth in rather an intimidating way. To prevent an encounter with an animal that might be hostile, I stepped nimbly behind the nearest tree. As I came round on the other side of the tree there, to my surprise, was this dog face to face with

me. Still desiring to avoid a collision with him, I stepped back the other way. Again I met the dog, which was now growling. The situation was rapidly becoming embarrassing when a gentleman came out upon the porch and called sharply to the dog. The dog, with apparent reluctance, retired under the house and the gentleman invited us inside and asked us to be seated. Glancing about his living room I noted that the furniture appeared to be a trifle modern for our purposes; but, as I whispered to my wife, you cannot expect to have everything to suit you at first. With the sweet you must ever take the bitter – that I believe is true, though not an original saying.

In opening the conversation with the strange gentleman I went in a businesslike way direct to the point.

“You are the owner of these premises?” I asked. He bowed. “I take it,” I then said, “that you are about to abandon this farm?”

“I beg your pardon?” he said, as though confused.

“I presume,” I explained, “that this is practically an abandoned farm.”

“Not exactly,” he said. “I’m here.”

“Yes, yes; quite so,” I said, speaking perhaps a trifle impatiently. “But you are thinking of going away from it, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he admitted; “I am.”

“Now,” I said, “we are getting round to the real situation. What are you asking for this place?”

“Eighteen hundred,” he stated. “There are ninety acres of land that go with the house and the house itself is in very good order.”

I considered for a moment. None of the abandoned farms I had ever read about sold for so much as eighteen hundred dollars. Still, I reflected, there might have been a recent bull movement; there had certainly been much publicity upon the subject. Before committing myself, I glanced at my wife. Her expression betokened acquiescence.

“That figure,” I said diplomatically, “was somewhat in excess of what I was originally prepared to pay; still, the house seems roomy and, as you were saying, there are ninety acres. The furniture and equipment go with the place, I presume?”

“Naturally,” he answered. “That is the customary arrangement.”

“And would you be prepared to give possession immediately?”

“Immediately,” he responded.

I began to feel enthusiasm. By the look on my wife’s face I could tell that she was enthused, too.

“If we come to terms,” I said, “and everything proves satisfactory, I suppose you could arrange to have the deed made out at once?”

“The deed?” he said blankly. “You mean the lease?”

“The lease?” I said blankly. “You mean the deed?”

“The deed?” he said blankly. “You mean the lease?”

“The lease, indeed,” said my wife. “You mean – ”

I broke in here. Apparently we were all getting the habit.

“Let us be perfectly frank in this matter,” I said. “Let us dispense with these evasive and dilatory tactics. You want eighteen hundred dollars for this place, furnished?”

“Exactly,” he responded. “Eighteen hundred dollars for it from June to October.” Then, noting the expressions of our faces, he continued hurriedly: “A remarkably small figure considering what summer rentals are in this section. Besides, this house is new. It costs a lot to reproduce these old Colonial designs!”

I saw at once that we were but wasting our time in this person’s company. He had not the faintest conception of what we wanted. We came away. Besides, as I remarked to the others after we were back in the car and on our way again, this house-farm would never have suited us; the

view from it was nothing extra. I told Winsell to go deeper into the country until we really struck the abandoned farm belt.

So we went farther and farther. After a while it was late afternoon and we seemed to be lost again. My wife and Winsell's wife were tired; so we dropped them at the next teahouse we passed. I believe it was the eighteenth teahouse for the day. Winsell and I then continued on the quest alone. Women know so little about business anyway that it is better, I think, whenever possible, to conduct important matters without their presence. It takes a masculine intellect to wrestle with these intricate problems; and for some reason or other this problem was becoming more and more complicated and intricate all the time.

On a long, deserted stretch of road, as the shadows were lengthening, we overtook a native of a rural aspect plodding along alone. Just as we passed him I was taken with an idea and I told Winsell to stop. I was tired of trafficking with stupid villagers and avaricious land-grabbers. I would deal with the peasantry direct. I would sound the yeoman heart – which is honest and true and ever beats in accord with the best dictates of human nature.

"My friend," I said to him, "I am seeking an abandoned farm. Do you know of many such in this vicinity?"

"How?" he asked.

I never got so tired of repeating a question in my life; nevertheless, for this yokel's limited understanding, I repeated it again.

"Well," he said at length, "whut with all these city fellers moving in here to do gentleman-farming – whatsoever that may mean – farm property has gone up until now it's wuth considerable more'n town property, as a rule. I could scursely say I know of any of the kind of farms you mention as laying round loose – no, wait a minute; I do recollect a place. It's that shack up back of the country poor farm that the supervisors used for a pest house the time the smallpox broke out. That there place is consider'bly abandoned. You might try –"

In a stern tone of voice I bade Winsell to drive on and turn in at the next farmhouse he came to. The time for trifling had passed. My mind was fixed. My jaw was also set. I know, because I set it myself. And I have no doubt there was a determined glint in my eye; in fact, I could feel the glint reflected upon my cheek.

At the next farm Winsell turned in. We passed through a stone gateway and rolled up a well-kept road toward a house we could see in glimpses through the intervening trees. We skirted several rather neat flower beds, curved round a greenhouse and came out on a stretch of lawn. I at once decided that this place would do undoubtedly. There might be alterations to make, but in the main the establishment would be satisfactory even though the house, on closer inspection, proved to be larger than it had seemed when seen from a distance.

On a signal from me Winsell halted at the front porch. Without a word I stepped out. He followed. I mounted the steps, treading with great firmness and decision, and rang the doorbell hard. A middle-aged person dressed in black, with a high collar, opened the door.

"Are you the proprietor of this place?" I demanded without any preamble. My patience was exhausted; I may have spoken sharply.

"Oh, no, sir," he said, and I could tell by his accent he was English; "the marster is out, sir."

"I wish to see him," I said, "on particular business – at once! At once, you understand – it is important!"

"Perhaps you'd better come in, sir," he said humbly. It was evident my manner, which was, I may say, almost haughty, had impressed him deeply. "If you will wait, sir, I'll have the marster called, sir. He's not far away, sir."

"Very good," I replied. "Do so!"

He showed us into a large library and fussed about, offering drinks and cigars and what-not. Winsell seemed somewhat perturbed by these attentions, but I bade him remain perfectly calm and collected, adding that I would do all the talking.

We took cigars – very good cigars they were. As they were not banded I assumed they were home grown. I had always heard that Connecticut tobacco was strong, but these specimens were very mild and pleasant. I had about decided I should put in tobacco for private consumption and grow my own cigars and cigarettes when the door opened, and a stout elderly man with side whiskers entered the room. He was in golfing costume and was breathing hard.

“As soon as I got your message I hurried over as fast as I could,” he said.

“You need not apologize,” I replied; “we have not been kept waiting very long.”

“I presume you come in regard to the traction matter?” he ventured.

“No,” I said, “not exactly. You own this place, I believe?”

“I do,” he said, staring at me.

“So far, so good,” I said. “Now, then, kindly tell me when you expect to abandon it.”

He backed away from me a few feet, gaping. He opened his mouth and for a few moments absent-mindedly left it in that condition.

“When do I expect to do what?” he inquired. “When,” I said, “do you expect to abandon it?” He shook his head as though he had some marbles inside of it and liked the rattling sound.

“I don’t understand yet,” he said, puzzled.

“I will explain,” I said very patiently. “I wish to acquire by purchase or otherwise one of the abandoned farms of this state. Not having been able to find one that was already abandoned, though I believe them to be very numerous, I am looking for one that is about to be abandoned. I wish, you understand, to have the first call on it. Winsell” – I said in an aside – “quit pulling at my coat-tail! Therefore,” I resumed, readdressing the man with the side whiskers, “I ask you a plain question, to wit: When do you expect to abandon this one? I expect a plain answer.”

He edged a few feet nearer an electric push button which was set in the wall. He seemed flustered and distraught; in fact, almost apprehensive.

“May I inquire,” he said nervously, “how you got in here?”

“Your servant admitted us,” I said, with dignity. “Yes,” he said in a soothing tone; “but did you come afoot – or how?”

“I drove here in a car,” I told him, though I couldn’t see what difference that made.

“Merciful Heavens!” he muttered. “They do not trust you – I mean you do not drive the car yourself, do you?”

Here Winsell cut in.

“I drove the car,” he said. “I – I did not want to come, but he” – pointing to me – “he insisted.” Winsell is by nature a groveling soul. His tone was almost cringing.

“I see,” said the gentleman, wagging his head, “I see. Sad case – very sad case! Young, too!” Then he faced me. “You will excuse me now,” he said. “I wish to speak to my butler. I have just thought of several things I wish to say to him. Now in regard to abandoning this place: I do not expect to abandon this place just yet – probably not for some weeks or possibly months. In case I should decide to abandon it sooner, if you will leave your address with me I will communicate with you by letter at the institution where you may chance to be stopping at the time. I trust this will be satisfactory.”

He turned again to Winsell.

“Does your – ahem – friend care for flowers?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Winsell. “I think so.”

“Perhaps you might show him my flower gardens as you go away,” said the side-whiskered man. “I have heard somewhere that flowers have a very soothing effect sometimes in such cases – or it may have been music. I have spent thirty thousand dollars beautifying these grounds and I

am really very proud of them. Show him the flowers by all means – you might even let him pick a few if it will humor him.”

I started to speak, but he was gone. In the distance somewhere I heard a door slam.

Under the circumstances there was nothing for us to do except to come away. Originally I did not intend to make public mention of this incident, preferring to dismiss the entire thing from my mind; but, inasmuch as Winsell has seen fit to circulate a perverted and needlessly exaggerated version of it among our circle of friends, I feel that the exact circumstances should be properly set forth.

It was a late hour when we rejoined our wives. This was due to Winsel’s stupidity in forgetting the route we had traversed after parting from them; in fact, it was nearly midnight before he found his way back to the teahouse where we left them. The teahouse had been closed for some hours then and our wives were sitting in the dark on the teahouse porch waiting for us. Really, I could not blame them for scolding Winsell; but they displayed an unwarranted peevishness toward me. My wife’s display of temper was really the last straw. It was that, taken in connection with certain other circumstances, which clinched my growing resolution to let the whole project slide into oblivion. I woke her up and in so many words told her so on the way home. We arrived there shortly after daylight of the following morning.

So, as I said at the outset, we gave up our purpose of buying an abandoned farm and moved into a flat on the upper west side.

CHAPTER III. THREE YEARS ELAPSE

I wound up the last preceding chapter of this chronicle with the statement that we had definitely given up all hope of owning an abandoned farm. After an interval of three years the time has now come to recant and to make explanation, touching on our change of heart and resolution. For at this writing I am an abandoned farmer of the most pronounced type and, with the assistance of my family, am doing my level best to convert or, as it were, evangelize one of the most thoroughly abandoned farms in the entire United States. By the same token we are also members in good standing of the Westchester County – New York – Despair Association.

The Westchester County Despair Association was founded by George Creel, who is one of our neighbors. In addition to being its founder he is its perpetual president. This association has a large and steadily growing membership. Any citybred person who moves up here among the rolling hills of our section with intent to get back to Nature, and who, in pursuance of that most laudable aim, encounters the various vicissitudes and the varied misfortunes which, it would seem, invariably do befall the amateur husbandman, is eligible to join the ranks.

If he builds a fine silo and promptly it burns down on him, as so frequently happens – silos appear to have a habit of deliberately going out of their way in order to catch afire – he joins automatically. If his new swimming pool won't hold water, or his new road won't hold anything else; if his hired help all quit on him in the busy season; if the spring freshets flood his cellar; if his springs go dry in August; if his horses succumb to one of those fatal diseases that are so popular among expensive horses; if his prize Jersey cow chokes on a turnip; if his blooded hens are so busy dying they have no time to give to laying – why, then, under any one or more of these heads he is welcomed into the fold. I may state in passing that, after an experimental test of less than six months of country life, we are eligible on several counts. However, I shall refer to those details later.

Up until last spring we had been living in the city for twelve years, with a slice of about four years out of the middle, during which we lived in one of the most suburban of suburbs. First we tried the city, then the suburb, then the city again; and the final upshot was, we decided that neither city nor suburb would do for us. In the suburb there was the daily commuting to be considered; besides, the suburb was neither city nor country, but a commingling of the drawbacks of the city and the country, with not many of the advantages of either. And the city was the city of New York.

Ours, I am sure, had been the common experience of the majority of those who move to New York from smaller communities – the experience of practically all except the group from which is recruited the confirmed and incurable New Yorker. After you move to New York it takes several months to rid you of homesickness for the place you have left; this period over, it takes several years usually to cure you of the lure of the city and restore to you the longing for the simpler and saner things.

To be sure, there is the exception. When I add this qualification I have in mind the man who wearies not of spending his evenings from eight-thirty until eleven at a tired-business-man's show; of eating tired-business-man's lunch in a lobsteria on the Great White Way from eleven-thirty p. m. until closing time; of having his toes trodden upon by other tired business men at the afternoon-dancing parlor; of twice a day, or oftener, being packed in with countless fellow tired business men in the tired cars of the tired Subway – I have him in mind, also the woman who is his ordained mate.

But, for the run of us, life in the city, within a flat, eventually gets upon our nerves; and life within the city, outside the flat, gets upon our nerves to an even greater extent. The main trouble about New York is not that it contains six million people, but that practically all of them are constantly engaged in going somewhere in such a hurry. Nearly always the place where they are going lies in the opposite direction from the place where you are going. There is where the rub comes, and sooner or later it rubs the nap off your disposition.

The everlasting shooting of the human rapids, the everlasting portages about the living whirlpools, the everlasting bucking of the human cross currents – these are the things that, in due time, turn the thoughts of the sojourner to mental pictures of peaceful fields and burdened orchards, and kind-faced cows standing knee-deep in purling brooks, and bosky dells and sylvan glades. At any rate, so our thoughts turned.

Then, too, a great many of our friends were moving to the country to live, or had already moved to the country to live. We spent week-ends at their houses; we went on house parties as their guests. We heard them babble of the excitement of raising things on the land. We thought they meant garden truck. How were we to know they also meant mortgages? At the time it did not impress us as a fact worthy of being regarded as significant that we should find a different set of servants on the premises almost every time we went to visit one of these families.

What fascinated us was the presence of fresh vegetables upon the table – not the car-sick, shopworn, wilted vegetables of the city markets, but really fresh vegetables; the new-laid eggs – after eating the other kind so long we knew they were new-laid without being told; the flower beds outside and the great bouquets of flowers inside the house; the milk that had come from a cow and not from a milkman; the home-made butter; the rich cream – and all.

We heard their tales of rising at daybreak and going forth to pick from the vines the platter of breakfast berries, still beaded with the dew. They got up at daybreak, they said, especially on account of the berry picking and the beauties of the sunrise. Having formerly been city dwellers, they had sometimes stayed up for a sunrise; but never until now had they got up for one. The novelty appealed to them tremendously and they never tired of talking of it.

In the country – so they told us – you never needed an alarm clock to rouse you at dawn. Subsequently, by personal experience, I found this to be true. You never need an alarm clock – if you keep chickens. You may not go to bed with the chickens, but you get up with them, unless you are a remarkably sound sleeper. When it comes to rousing the owner, from slumber before the sun shows, the big red rooster and the little brown hen are more dependable than any alarm clock ever assembled. You might forget to wind the alarm clock. The big red rooster winds himself. You might forget to set the alarm clock. The little brown hen does her own setting; and even in cases where she doesn't, she likes to wake up about four-forty-five and converse about her intentions in the matter in a shrill and penetrating tone of voice.

It had been so long since I had lived in the country I had forgotten about the early-rising habits of barnyard fowl. I am an expert on the subject now. Only this morning there was a rooster suffering from hay fever or a touch of catarrh, or something that made him quite hoarse; and he strolled up from the chicken house to a point directly beneath my bedroom window, just as the first pink streaks of the new day were painting the eastern skies, and spent fully half an hour there clearing his throat.

But I am getting ahead of my story. More and more we found the lure of the country was enmeshing our fancies. After each trip to the country we went back to town to find that, in our absence, the flat had somehow grown more stuffy and more crowded; that the streets had become more noisy and more congested. And the outcome of it with us was as the outcome has been with so many hundreds and thousands and hundreds of thousands of others. We voted to go to the country to live.

Having reached the decision, the next thing was to decide on the site and the setting for the great adventure. We unanimously set our faces against New Jersey, mainly because, to get from New Jersey over to New York and back again, you must take either the ferry or the tube; and if there was one thing on earth that we cared less for than the ferry it was the tube. To us it seemed that most of the desirable parts of Long Island were already preëmpted by persons of great wealth, living, so we gathered, in a state of discriminating aloofness and, as a general rule, avoiding social

association with families in the humbler walks of life. Round New York the rich cannot be too careful – and seldom are. Most of them are suffering from nervous culture anyhow.

Land in the lower counties of Connecticut, along the Sound, was too expensive for us to consider moving up there. But there remained what seemed to us then and what seems to us yet the most wonderful spot for country homes of persons in moderate circumstances anywhere within the New York zone, or anywhere else, for that matter – the hill country of the northern part of Westchester County, far enough back from the Hudson River to avoid the justly famous Hudson River glare in the summer, and close enough to it to enable a dweller to enjoy the Hudson River breezes and the incomparable Hudson River scenery.

Besides, a lot of our friends lived there. There was quite a colony of them scattered over a belt of territory that intervened between the magnificent estates of the multi-millionaires to the southward and the real farming country beyond the Croton Lakes, up the valley. By a process of elimination we had now settled upon the neighborhood where we meant to live. The task of finding a suitable location in this particular area would be an easy one, we thought.

I do not know how the news of this intention spread. We told only a few persons of our purpose. But spread it did, and with miraculous swiftness. Overnight almost, we began to hear from real-estate agents having other people's property to sell and from real-estate owners having their own property to sell. They reached us by mail, by telephone, by messenger, and in person. It was a perfect revelation to learn that so many perfectly situated, perfectly appointed country places, for one reason or another, were to be had for such remarkable figures. Indeed, when we heard the actual amounts the figures were more than remarkable – they were absolutely startling. I am convinced that nothing is so easy to buy as a country place and nothing is so hard to sell. This observation is based upon our own experiences on the buying side and on the experiences of some of my acquaintances who want to sell – and who are taking it out in wanting.

In addition to agents and owners, there came also road builders, well diggers, interior decorators, landscape gardeners, general contractors, an architect or so, agents for nurseries, tree-mending experts, professional foresters, persons desiring to be superintendent of our country place, persons wishful of taking care of our livestock for us – a whole shoal of them. It booted us nothing to explain that we had not yet bought a place; that we had not even looked at a place with the prospect of buying. Almost without exception these callers were willing to sit down with me and use up hours of my time telling me how well qualified they were to deliver the goods as soon as I had bought land, or even before I had bought it.

From the ruck of them as they came avalanching down upon us two or three faces and individualities stand out. There was, for example, the chimney expert. That was what he called himself – a chimney expert. His specialty was constructing chimneys that were guaranteed against smoking, and curing chimneys, built by others, which had contracted the vice. The circumstance of our not having any chimneys of any variety at the moment did not halt him when I had stated that fact to him. He had already removed his hat and overcoat and taken a seat in my study, and he continued to remain right there. He seemed comfortable; in fact, I believe he said he was comfortable.

From chimneys he branched out into a general conversation with me upon the topics of the day.

In my time I have met persons who knew less about a wider range of subjects than he did, but they had superior advantages over him. Some had traveled about over the world, picking up misinformation; some had been educated into a broad and comprehensive ignorance. But here was a self-taught ignoramus – one, you might say, who had made himself what he was. He may have known all about the habits and shortcomings of flues; but, once you let him out of a chimney, he was adrift on an uncharted sea of mispronounced names, misstated facts and faulty dates.

We discussed the war – or, rather, he erroneously discussed it. We discussed politics and first one thing and then another, until finally the talk worked its way round to literature; and then it was he told me I was one of his favorite authors. “Well,” I said to myself, at that, “this person may be shy in some of his departments, but he’s all right in others.” And then, aloud, I told him that he interested me and asked him to go on.

“Yes, sir,” he continued; “I don’t care what anybody says, you certainly did write one mighty funny book, anyhow. You’ve wrote some books that I didn’t keer so much for; but this here book, ef it’s give me one laugh it’s give me a thousand! I can come in dead tired out and pick it up and read a page – yes, read only two or three lines sometimes – and just natchelly bust my sides. How you ever come to think up all them comical sayings I don’t, for the life of me, see! I wonder how these other fellers that calls themselves humorists have got the nerve to keep on tryin’ to write when they read that book of yours.”

“What did you say the name of this particular book was?” I asked, warming to the man in spite of myself.

“It’s called *Fables in Slang*,” he said.

I did not undeceive him. He had spoiled my day for me. Why should I spoil his?

Then, there was the persistent nursery-man’s agent, with the teeth. He was the most toothsome being I ever saw. The moment he came in, the thought occurred to me that in his youth somebody had put tooth powders into his coffee. He may not have had any more teeth than some people have, but he had a way of presenting his when he smiled or when he spoke, or even when his face was in repose, which gave him the effect of being practically all teeth. Aside from his teeth, the most noticeable thing about him was his persistence. I began protesting that it would be but a waste of his time and mine to take up the subject of fruit and shade trees and shrubbery, because, even though I might care to invest in his lines, I had at present no soil in which to plant them. But he seemed to regard this as a mere technicality on my part, and before I was anywhere near done with what I meant to say to him he had one arm round me and was filling my lap and my arms and my desktop with catalogues, price lists, illustrations in color, order slips, and other literature dealing with the products of the house he represented.

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