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Seasoned Timber

By Dorothy Canfield

CHAPTER FOUR
(Continued)

But they were disappointed by her reaction to the news. She only said, "You don't say so. Well . . . and reached for the empty pie plate in front of Miss Peck.

What Mr. Hulme was thinking as he helped Aunt Lavinia on with her cloak was, "Why not? After all, why not?"

• • •

"You must tell me," said Timothy Hulme to Susan, looking around the low-ceilinged room, "how it was when you lived here. That'll give me a notion of how to make it look as if I really belonged."

"But it does look as it used to. Only fresher. Grandfather never had money. The yellow paint on these walls is like sunshine."

"Do ye know what I'd like?" said Aunt Lavinia, from the armchair where she had been half-dozing. "I'd like my tea. But I suppose ye have na' tea things up here yet, Tim?"

"Would I be asking Lavinia Coulton to any place that hadna' tea things?" said Timothy. "Susan, come along, will you, and help me get the tea?"

After she had had her tea, Aunt Lavinia's eyes began to droop again. "Well, go along, Tim, and have Susan show you all over the place," she said sleepily.

They went out of the back door into the dark limbo of the woodshed, and emerged from that into the sweet pale sunshine of November.

They struck diagonally across the uplifted oblong of the hill pasture. After a few steps, "Do you know what I'd like?" she said, using Aunt Lavinia's turn of phrase. "I'd like awfully—if you wouldn't mind telling me—to know some more about—Mrs. Henry."

The other name had trembled so obviously on her tongue that Timothy could say, quite naturally, "Call her Aunt Lavinia. She'd like that."

They were standing by an outcropping of rock. "Let's sit down for a while," suggested Susan.

"Let yourself go — don't be afraid of falling," thought Timothy Hulme, and in a dreamy murmur began with the first words that came into his head, "When my brother and I were little, Aunt Lavinia and my mother used to tell us that the reason Aunt Lavinia followed my father and mother was because my mother's alto voice couldn't get along without her soprano. That was like them. The real reason was that they loved each other. They all sang. Father played the cello and Mother the violin. Aunt Lavinia was a professional pianist—you should have heard her play before the arthritis stiffened her fingers.

After a silence, "Where did you live?" she murmured.

"Oh, all around New York. In what used to be suburbs. Aunt Lavinia had a music studio in the city where she gave her lessons, so it didn't make any difference to her where she lived, so long as 'little Margaret' was there. Margaret was my mother. We were really very happy."

"What was your father's work?"

"He had a position in a publishing house. He had gone straight from Oxford to a firm of publishers in London. And after a while their American branch offered him a better position in New York."

He had come to the end of what could be told lounging on this warm rock in tepid sunshine. What was now to be said stood up threateningly before him and his muscles, tightening, brought him to his feet to face it.

"Yes, I suppose we'd better go on," said Susan.

Leaning against the steepness of the field, they began climbing again, and soon, as if to keep up with the nervous haste of the narrator, climbing rapidly. "My little brother Downer was — how old was he? — ten — before we were wakened from our good dream." He reflected, and said dryly, "Aunt Lavinia fell in love then and married and went away with her husband to Australia. She had always said she could not live without her little sister. Yet she left her to go to the other side of the globe. She was thirty-seven years old and although she was a lovely creature, she had never cared for any man before."

"What kind of man?" asked Susan, her breath coming quickly with the swiftness of their pace.

"I never knew much about him. I was only thirteen years old then. All I know was that Father and Mother couldn't endure him." In the same harsh voice he now said rapidly, "And six or seven months after that, my mother had pneumonia and died.

"When you were only fourteen years old!" she said slowly, her young voice rich with compassion.

With an appeased sigh he turned to climb again, slowly now, plodding step by step as the dark words dropped, one by one. "And then my father went to pieces. He took to drinking. He let his work go. And then one morning when I got up, I found Father lying at the foot of the stairs. He wasn't unconscious, but he didn't know me. He died in the hospital the next day."

"Oh! What did you do?" cried the girl.

"I got a job? I had to take care of Downer. He had to be put through school."

"What kind of job? A boy of fifteen!"

"Boys' jobs. One after another. Sweeping out a grocery store, selling neckties in a cheap haberdashery. Delivering packages for a butcher."

"How did you live?"

"In a hall bedroom. We found one with a double bed. We cooked on the gas jet. We didn't know how to take care of ourselves, or our clothes, how to get the right food. Downer was sick a good deal — sore throats. Aunt Lavinia wrote me, all this time, begging me to say just how we boys were living, and if Father had left us money enough. I never answered her very exactly, except to say that we were all right, getting on . . . And then on a black, zero stormy winter evening, when I got back from work frozen and pushed open the door to that room—there was Aunt Lavinia! She was sitting on our frowsy bed, talking to Downer, stroking his head with her strong, white musician's hand that was exactly like my mother's."

His listener dashed her hand across her eyes, and said in a trembling voice, "But I thought you said you hadn't told her."

"I hadn't. She had guessed. From what I hadn't put into my letters, I suppose. Well, she held the door open, and I went through that door to the kind of life my mother meant me to have—to college, to decent living, to music, to a home. Aunt Lavinia taught music again, had another church choir to manage, got a little apartment, made a circle of civilized people for us to know."

"Well, she saw me through Columbia and into a position as teacher in a city high school, and got Downer into a job as salesman that interested him, where he was doing well. And then she went back to Australia to her husband. I was astounded when after I'd left New York and come to Clifford to teach, a letter come to say she thought she would like to make me a visit. I went down to meet her ship. And when I saw her . . ." Through clenched teeth he said in a choked voice, "He'd paid her out for leaving him! I don't know what he'd done to her! She'd gone a little insane, I think. On the dock, she was saying over and over, 'I've come back to see do you still need me, Tim? If you don't let me die."

The girl's lips were trembling. A tear brimmed over and ran down her cheek.

He smiled at her with a confident tenderness. "Well, now you know about Aunt Lavinia," he said. "and you're the only person in the world who does."

She turned upon him the full thrilling look that had made two other talks with her unforgettable.

• • •

Just after Christmas, when Timothy's short winter vacation was beginning, he had a summons from Mr. Wheaton to go at once to New York for a talk about the Academy finances. "It's absurd!" he exclaimed to Mr. Dewey. There's nothing in the world he has to say that he couldn't write just as well."

To be continued

Burgess Bedtime

Continued from page 11

living.

Peter didn't see him at first, and started in along one of the private little paths that Ragged-Ear had cut. He was stopped by a sudden sharp thump. He thumped right back, and he was answered right back. That was Rabbit language understood perfectly by both.

Ragged-Ear's first thump had said, "keep out!"

Peter's thump had said, "Who are you?"

Ragged-Ear's next thump had said, "This is my home, keep out."

Peter had promptly thumped back, "be respectful to your elders, young fellow. You don't own the Old Pasture."

Then they stopped thumping and started staring at each other. you living here, or just visiting?"

"I'm living here," replied the young Rabbit. "Why?"

Peter chuckled. "I guess you haven't met Old Jed Thumper. He thinks he owns the Old Pasture. He won't allow any other Rabbit to live here."

"He hasn't bothered me," replied the young Rabbit.

Peter shook his head. "I don't understand it. He must be getting old. Yes, sir, he must be getting old."

"Where do you live?" asked Ragged-Ear. "And who are you?"

"I live in the Old Briar-patch out on the Green Meadows and my name is Peter Rabbit," replied Peter.

He was Ragged-Ear's father, and neither knew it.

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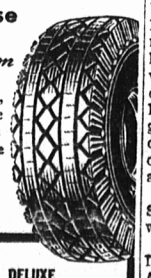

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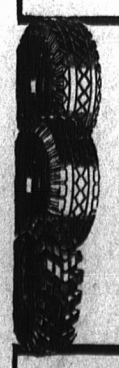

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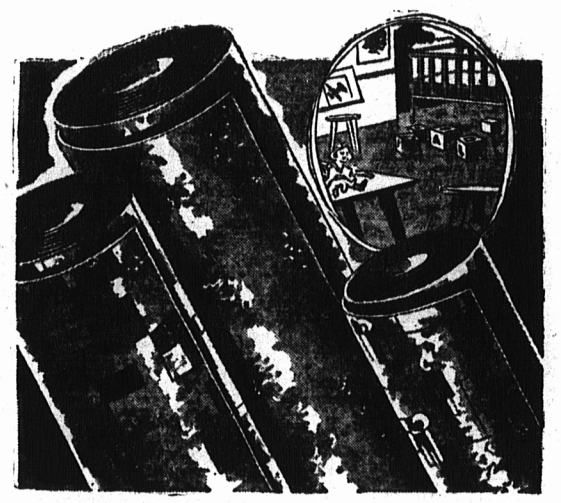

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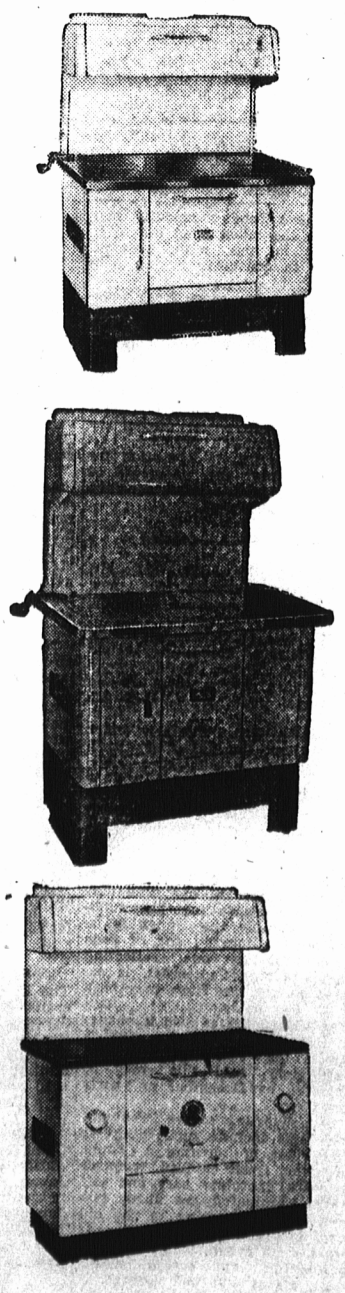

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