

to recall Joshua 1:9 again. Even then I quavered as I asked Mr. Ashton Jones, Jr., about selling me the twenty-foot strip. While he was in the next room talking it over with another member of his firm, I kept praying for success. Soon Mr. Jones came back with news that they could not sell me the strip.

Desperately trying to devise some way to induce them to change their minds, I almost missed the rest of his statement, "But we have decided we will let you have fifty feet, if you care to consider it."

"Care to consider it?" I wanted to shout—but the price? A lot 260 feet by 50 feet would probably cost thousands. When he said I could have it for seven hundred and fifty dollars I must have gasped. Before he had a chance to change his mind, I agreed to the purchase. One of the bonds I had been hoarding for finishing upstairs would pay for it.

Just as I started to sign our contract, Mr. Jones gave me another shock. He supposed I knew that a sanitary sewer line ran diagonally across the tract I was buying. It accounted for the low price they were asking, because it made the area worthless for building. But for me the extra fifty feet was priceless. Thanking Mr. Jones for telling me about it, I completed the transaction.

That was the beginning of my long-drawn-out struggle to retain the natural beauty around me—a struggle that would continue for many years, taxing all my resources and before which I might have weakened had I known all that I would encounter.

Chapter VI

Visitors Welcome and Unwelcome

My sister Lee had accepted my invitation. How I wished she would like Havenwood well enough to make it her home! With some apprehension I set about trying to make it as attractive as possible for her. I was most concerned about getting the musty odor out of the old furniture in her room. Every day for a week I carried the drawers and all removable parts out for sunning. But for John, my ebony angel, I never would have gotten the mattress outside. When Mr. Trapp came to pick up John one Tuesday afternoon, he asked if I would help him out next day by taking care of a couple who were interested in the house next door.

"I'm sorry I forgot the key," he explained, "but since the arrangement of the houses is the same, I feel it will be all right with Andy Jones if you'll let him see yours."

With no idea of what I was undertaking, I agreed.

That evening a telegram came from Lee saying she would arrive early Thursday morning. She also gave information of when and where to meet her at the Union Station. With only one day for final preparations, I was up early Wednesday morning and before breakfast had vacuumed and dusted, buffed the floors and made the beds, Lee's with my best hand-crocheted spread.

I was ready for Trapp's couple when a little later I answered my buzzer. A whole family stood on my porch. The muscular-looking head of the family was neat enough in his work clothes, but his wife had a bedraggled, harassed look. No wonder, with a heavy baby propped on her hunched-up hip and four larger boys trailing after her.

"I tol' you to stay in the car," she protested.

Her husband intervened, "Oh, leave 'em be. The kids want to see the house, too, and we can keep an eye on them in here." Turning to me, he said, "Good morning, Ma'am, we're the Joneses and ap-

preciate your letting us come in to look around. Come on, kids, and behave yourselves. The lady here is good enough to let us all come in." I hadn't said I would, but I tried to appear cordial as the invaders filed in.

Without warning, Mrs. Jones thrust the infant into her husband's arms, "Here! Your turn to tote, you hammerhead."

The bawl let out by the young fellow added to the general confusion, but his father soon quieted him.

The elder Joneses seemed so taken with the appearance of the house that, for my protection, I began to point out the disadvantages, such as a very small dining area for a family of seven.

Mama, having already measured the space with her well-trained eye, was sure "it was big enough for every cotton pickin' one of them to eat their grub." Anyway the baby didn't generally come to the table and very often Papa was late. Poor man! Who could blame him, if he didn't show up at all?

How about the bathroom? Could only one accommodate their needs? Again, Mama had the answers. As a rule the kids went in pairs. A nice place for their water battles. If they wanted to go it single, Papa was a plumber and could always fix the tank with plenty of hot water. Judging from the children's grimy hands and faces, it was apparent that Papa's talents hadn't been overtaxed around home.

When Mama saw the crocheted bedspread I was afraid I'd have to part with it or have her move in with Lee. She remained downcast over the problem of having only two bedrooms until we reached the basement.

As we started down the stairs Papa must have sensed my anxiety at having the children slide across my living room as if it were a skating rink.

Taking from the table a copy of *House Beautiful*, he called the oldest boy to him and said, "Here is a nice picture book. Why don't you sit down and read yourselves some cute stories in it?"

Although I had just bought the magazine for an article on interior decoration, I didn't interfere.

"Oh, look at this!" Mama exclaimed entranced with her view of the basement. "The cots we could have down here."

"Sure thing, even if the family keeps on growing. Listen to them

up there now. I thought them pictures would do it."

With some anxiety, I had noticed the extreme quiet myself.

"What a place to turn them loose. Of course boys will be. . ."

A shattering crash finished the sentence for him. I wondered if the mantelpiece had been dislocated or the Singer sewing machine that had served the Dials for fifty years had suffered complete wreckage.

Arriving upstairs, I found myself in the midst of a spit-ball battle. What a relief! The crash—merely the piano stool overturned. But another danger threatened. How could I rescue my fragile console table on which the oldest child, as human target, stood dodging missiles from all directions? With one quick stroke, Mama answered the question for me. Grabbing the boy from the table she dragged him across the room.

To the three younger boys, standing immobilized, she called, "Clear out, before I light on you!"

As the children scurried before her, she had the presence of mind to remember her manners. Pausing in the doorway, she said, "It was gol dern nice of you to show us around. Tell the man we like his place real good. If the price ain't too G-- d-- high, we may buy it."

Mr. Jones, still carrying the baby, arrived from the basement and after a quick glance around, said, "At least they ain't broke anything. I hope we ain't been too much trouble, ma'am." Then he followed his family to the car.

Too much trouble! I could have wept. The ominous quiet of the little angels had no doubt been while they were chewing up pages of my *House Beautiful* for ammunition.

As I worked on the room, I wondered what such a family next door would do to my retreat. I certainly couldn't afford to buy another house to protect the one I had, but I shuddered to think of having such people for neighbors. Nothing within my borders would be safe, not even the placid stream. If it were my privilege to name Trapp's price, it would be a figure beyond even a plumber's purse.

I couldn't take the time I would have liked indoors, because I still had a great deal to do in the yard. Geared for the wilds in overalls, a long-sleeved blouse, a wide brimmed hat and heavy cotton gloves, I did the mowing with my easy-running little machine. The hardest part was tugging it to and from the basement through the

living room. That is where I left it this time so that I could hurry back outside. I wanted to cut a path to the woods where for days, a flaming lily had been luring me. High above the other vegetation its single stalk displayed probably two dozen blossoms.



"For days a flaming lily had been luring me."

My arms and legs smeared with Naptha soap, and my hands, face and neck with a milder salve, I was ready for my work in the brambles when I heard my buzzer. It was Mother and my sisters, Fanny Perry and Dorothy Smith, who lived in Washington. In what a plight they found me. Their immaculate grooming, from the tips of their slippers to the glory of their just-right hair-dos made me feel like the ugly duckling. Then there was the lawn mower. Such an object had

never been inside either of my sisters' houses, much less featured in their elegant living rooms. In all the chatter, with Fannie well in the lead, there was no use even trying to explain.

As we looked around the premises, my family made only tactful comments until we came to the strawberry plants languishing in their bed of red mud. Then Dorothy said impishly, "Let us know when your crop comes in, Beck. We'll come out and help you pick them."

I couldn't resist asking, "Why not give me a hand with the brambles today? I want to make a path to that lily back there."

"How beautiful!" said Mother viewing it with an artist's eye.

"If I had the path cut, we could see it closer."

"You're not cutting that stuff yourself?" Fannie asked.

"Yes, and I have on this gear for protection from poison ivy."

"Poison ivy!" Fannie squeaked.

"Oh, Beck, you can't," Mother remonstrated. "It looks as if it might be full of snakes."

That was enough to end further yard inspection. As if a bomb had struck, my family hastened toward the house, all thought of seeing my stream forgotten.

I was disappointed at that and also that they declined my invitation to have tea. It deprived me of christening my new blue set, just purchased at the Five-and-Ten.

Back in the living room, trying to attract as little attention as possible despite the lawn mower's clanking blades, I managed to get it out of sight. I fervently hoped that I'd gotten all the spit balls from the chairs. With Mother seated in Dad's old rocker, I asked if she had found an apartment.

"No, but I have gotten a good offer on the house, so I will be selling it soon. Then there will be a lot of things for you children."

"Fine, I can certainly use my share."

Mother looked around appraisingly, making me painfully conscious of the contents of my living room: the sewing machine with a piano stool beside it in one corner; the chaise longue with its garish-looking cover; a console table, a few folding chairs and Dad's rocker.

Explaining that some young visitors had created the disorder, I hastened to add, "When I move my things they will make a big difference. I will get them as soon as I finish the rest of the house."

"You aren't planning to finish it soon?" Fannie asked.

"As quickly as possible. I am very anxious to start my retreat."

"You mean you'll have people staying here?" Fannie asked in surprise.

"Not for meals?" Dorothy showed greater surprise as I nodded to both their questions.

I knew they were thinking about my cooking so I said, "Lee's coming tomorrow. I'll have her to practice on."

They didn't say, "Poor Lee," but I felt they were thinking it.

"Maybe Lee will help me. She's been keeping house a long time. Anyway a person with intelligence should be able to learn to cook with a good cook book—and I have two." I tried to sound self-assured.

"Don't forget the Bromo Seltzer," Dorothy teased.

To spare me further discomfort, Mother changed the subject. Gladly I accepted her invitation for Lee, Dave, and me to have dinner with her the next night.

When they were leaving, Fannie cautioned, "Don't work too hard."

Mother said, "And do be careful of snakes."

Dorothy insisted, "Let us know when the strawberries are ripe."

As they walked out to the car, I wondered if I had ever looked as they did in their lovely clothes, and if I ever would again.

With my grass hook, I went back to my job.

Chapter VII

My Sister Lee

Walking up my dark street before dawn on my way to meet Lee gave me an eerie feeling. Stumbling over rocks and rough places, I clutched my purse as if there might be a pick-pocket behind every bush. When I reached the lighted highway at last, I drew a deep breath, but welcomed the sight of my bus approaching.

Much earlier than necessary, I was waiting at the gate for Lee's train, which finally came rumbling in. I soon glimpsed her petite figure, as she lightly threaded her way through the crowd. Her dark brown suit harmonized with her auburn hair. Remembering her dislike for effusiveness, I curbed my impulse to fling my arms around her and give her a big hug.

We had so much to talk about on the way home that I didn't know where to begin. After her divorce, Lee had gone to Hot Springs, Arkansas, for treatment for a neuritic arm. She had liked it well enough to take an apartment and remain there. She seemed proud of the fact that now everything she owned was in the luggage in the trunk of our cab. However, she did speak regretfully of having sold some of her belongings at great sacrifice.

"The last thing I got rid of was my silver," she said.

"Not your wedding silver?"

"Why not? I can't cart things like that around the country with me, when I never expect to keep house again."

"What do you plan to do, Lee?"

"I don't know where I'll settle, but it won't be where I have to do any housekeeping. I hate cleaning, washing, cooking—everything about it. Even if I did take a place somewhere I wouldn't need a dozen of everything like I had."

"Your beautiful Lady Fairfax! How much did you get for it?"

"A hundred dollars."

I was making a quick calculation. That would be a big outlay for me at this time, but I couldn't pass it up. "Do you think they might sell it back to me?"

"You mean you would like to have it?" she said in surprise.

"Very much."

"We'd have to call them right away, before they melt it down."

"Melt it?"

"Yes, the pawn broker. . . ."

I groaned.

"That's what he expects to do with it."

I tried to appear interested in other things, but I could hardly wait to get home to call the pawnbroker. I might never again have a chance of owning such a set of silver. I felt fortunate that a pawnbroker who could not raise the redemption price held it. A dealer, no doubt, would have expected to make a profit.

The nearer we got to Havenwood, the more panicky I felt. Trying to prepare Lee for my wilderness, I began, "Of course, Lee, my home is small and the yard is . . ." but we had stopped in front of my door and I had to pay the driver.

I hurried Lee on to her room, closing my door as we passed to cut off the view of my cell-like quarters with its cot and bare necessities. After showing Lee the bathroom, I went to prepare breakfast and managed it without mishap.

"You have a nice breakfast nook here," she said, sipping her orange juice, which was fresh from the squeezer.

"A little crowded, but I like the old table and chairs, and the marble-topped washstand makes a convenient work table."

"It's nice you enjoy cooking," she said and I didn't contradict her. It was better for her not to know the struggle I was having.

After breakfast, looking around from the porch, Lee exclaimed, "Why you live in a forest!"

"Yes, I'm clearing it by degrees, making paths where we can walk. I've just cut one to that gorgeous lily back there. See!" I pointed to my prize exhibit.

"It's pretty," she said, giving it a casual glance. "But don't you have any flower beds?"

"I hope to very soon, Lee." I knew I could expect no help from

Lee in the the kitchen, but I trusted she might become interested in gardening if I could ever get some plots cleared. "I certainly have plenty of room. My property goes fifty feet beyond the stream out there."

"A stream? How can you stand so much dampness?"

"I hadn't noticed it, except that it makes it cool like it is today."

"Why don't you cover it over?"

I replied austerely, "Lee, the stream is my reason for buying this property."

"Then you don't have neuritis like I do."

Just then I was glad to hear my buzzer, but it didn't help matters. A contractor who had seen me about my plans a few days before had come to give me the estimates.

As Lee came in from the porch, he was booming out, "Three thousand dollars for the upstairs and three thousand five hundred with the basement."

I told him I would think it over and call him later.

As soon as he had gone, Lee asked, "What was he talking about?"

"I am planning to have my upstairs and basement finished."

"Not at those prices, I hope."

"No, I'll have to get other estimates."

"Why do you want more room, anyway?"

It didn't seem to be the time to tell her about the retreat, so I said, "I was just looking into it. Come, let's get you unpacked."

Her simple, modish dresses were soon hung. The remainder of her wardrobe didn't begin to fill the spacious drawers of the old dresser. We left the locker with her winter things for later. I was glad we had gotten her settled so quickly, because I was eager to call the Hot Springs shop.

My call was further delayed because of the difference in the time zone which I had overlooked. When I finally contacted the shop, I waited anxiously while a clerk looked up the record. What a relief it was to find that the silver was there, intact! However they had made arrangements to dispose of it the following day and I would have to get the money to them at once. That meant wiring it, which I would do on the way to Mother's.

After lunch while Lee was taking a nap, I had a few minutes for work in my wilderness. I needed a rake to gather up what I cut.

Probably mother would lend me hers. I wished that she had a wheelbarrow, too.

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It was quite a gathering at Mother's that evening with my sisters and their husbands and Dave. Both husbands were nice-looking and good company. Dave was at his best and Lee sparkled under the warmth of the family welcome.

Mother gave permission for me to take not only her rake, but any other tools I needed. Her yard man could use his own implements in caring for her small plot of grass. She also promised me blankets, linens and household effects for my retreat.

"Retreat?" Lee queried.

"Hasn't she told you about it?" Mother asked. "She has been talking about having people come and stay at her home. It may be all right, but I am afraid she works too hard."

Dave, glad to have an ally, broke in, "That's what I tell her, Mrs. Dial, but she won't listen to me."

"She must be careful about snakes in so much undergrowth. In fact she should not go outside until her grounds have been completely cleared," Mother declared positively.

Dr. Perry then asked if I knew what to do in case I was bitten by a snake. I was glad to have the benefit of his knowledge, although reptile bites were not high on my list of anxieties just then. I was thankful, however, to have the poor creatures divert attention from me and my affairs.

After a pleasant evening Lee and I started home with Dave, my borrowed garden implements packed in the trunk of his car. On the way, when Lee asked about the retreat, I explained that I felt I had a restful setting for people who might want to take it easy for a while in a place close to nature. Some might like to study or write, some read, and others just browse and roam around through the woods. To my relief, she approved the idea. And for once, Dave withheld objections.

Chapter VIII

The Joneses for Neighbors

The next morning Lee and I, shod sensibly, were off to market with two roomy shopping bags. Shopping for groceries was no grab-as-you-can affair with Lee. She might not like to cook food, but she certainly knew how to select it. The thoroughness with which she went over fruits and vegetables was a lesson to me. She also knew the best buys in cereals and canned foods and how to select meats. Owing to her standards of efficiency, only the choicest of foods at minimum prices now found their way to our table. To do such food justice made me study my cook books. Before I knew it my cooking began to show improvement.

On account of her neuritic arm Lee couldn't carry much of a load, so that a daily marketing trip seemed best. This also gave her good excuse for a walk while I applied myself to the yard and other duties.

One afternoon as I began opening a path at the back of the lot where the trees and undergrowth were thickest, the air became unusually oppressive and the western sky darkened with storm clouds. However, since flirting with nature was an amusing pastime with me, I purposely lingered even when a few heavy drops began pelting down. I thought I could work on a little longer, then still beat the shower to the house. But this time nature tricked me by sending a sudden cloudburst. Water poured over and around me and rivulets rushed down into the stream, which had suddenly risen several feet. Moreover, it carried all kinds of rubbish with it, much of which lodged on the big rock. I could see I would have a lot of clearing to do once the storm was past.

Suddenly I thought of the windows in the house, but Lee always took care of them when I wasn't around. There was no tearing myself away from this spectacle of nature, although the wind was lashing me with the downpour. The sound of the wind in the tree tops blended

with that of the turbulent stream, now up to the top of the banks. I caught glimpses of larger objects, mostly limbs and pieces of lumber carried on by the current. But what was this creation shooting past with a wheel that turned as it bobbed along? Maybe it was some kind of capsized boat. Finally the rain slackened and the wind died down, enabling me to hurry to the big rock where the strange object was trapped on top of a mass of debris. I could see it plainly now. Instead of a boat, it was a wheelbarrow. My stream had brought me a wheelbarrow!

As soon as the waters subsided enough, I slid down the bank and dragged my treasure to safety. It was such a wreck that I had no qualms about keeping it. With some repair, it would serve my purpose. My little stream had served me well.

Lee was horrified when, muddy and dripping, I dashed through the house to the shower. Almost in tears, she predicted pneumonia, but I was tingling with the thrill of having a wheelbarrow.

A message Lee delivered from Mr. Trapp halted me. He had stopped by with the key to the house next door and he wanted me to give it to the Joneses. They expected to move in next day.

"The Joneses!" Suddenly I was chilled to the bone. "Are you sure he said the Joneses?"

Lee put Trapp's note into my hand. There was no mistake.

"I knew you would have pneumonia! You look like you are sick already. Get out of those wet clothes before you collapse!"

Something within me had already collapsed.

Before breakfast I was at the telephone calling companies listed for fencing. It would take a high one to shield me from the Joneses. A fortress, impenetrable and sound proof, would be better, but the price of even a four-foot chain anchor fence was more than I could afford.

I didn't want to feel the way I did about the Joneses, but how could I possibly have a retreat with them next door? My only comfort was in the thought that in case of a burst pipe it might be handy to have a plumber around. Poor man! He had my sympathy. But poor me!

If I could only escape, run and hide somewhere, but Lee was calling, "The Joneses are here." When I didn't move from the telephone, she said, "I knew you would be sick from getting soaked yesterday."

"Soaked, soaked. That's what some people would do," I murmured as I dragged myself to the door.

A nice-looking couple with a baby stood there.

"You're not the Joneses!" I blurted out.

"Yeah, I'm Herb Jones and this is my wife, Alice, and our kid, Judy," the man replied pleasantly. "We've bought the house next door and. . ."

"Thank God! Oh, please excuse me! I've been kind of upset. I'm awfully glad to see you. I'll get your key, but won't you come in and have some breakfast?"

They had already eaten and expected the truck to arrive with their things in a few minutes. As I handed the key to Mr. Jones, the chubby infant in his arms clutched for it, then, as they turned to go, waved "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, you darling!" I said throwing her a kiss, then called to them, "I'm so glad to have you for my next door neighbors!"

They would never know how glad.