

► *About your arty friends who escape
it all in the cosy country jungles*

THE HOLLYHOCK SOWERS

BY THOMAS WOLFE

THERE are some men who are unequal to the conditions of modern life, and who have accordingly retreated from the tough realities which they cannot face. They form a separate group or family or race, a little world which has no boundary lines of country or of place. One finds a surprising number of them in America, particularly in the more sequestered purlieus of Boston, Cambridge, and Harvard University. One finds them also in New York's Greenwich Village, and when even that makeshift Little Bohemia becomes too harsh for them, they retire into a kind of desiccated country life.

For all such people the country becomes the last refuge. They buy little farms in Connecticut or Vermont, renovate the fine old houses with just a shade too much of whimsey or of restrained good taste. Their quaintness is a little too quaint, their simplicity a little too subtle, and on the old farms that they buy no utilitarian seeds are sown and no grain grows. They go in for flowers, and in time they

learn to talk very knowingly about the rarer varieties. They love the simple life, of course. They love the good feel of "the earth." They are just a shade too conscious of "the earth," and one often hears them say, the women as well as the men, how much they love to work in it.

And work in it they do. In spring they work on their new rock garden, with the assistance of only one other man — some native of the region who hires himself out for wages, and whose homely virtues and more crotchety characteristics they quietly observe and tell amusing stories about to their friends. Their wives work in the earth, too, attired in plain yet not unattractive frocks, and they even learn to clip the hedges, wearing canvas gloves to protect their hands. These dainty and lovely creatures become healthily embrowned; their comely forearms take on a golden glow, their faces become warm with soaked-up sunlight, and sometimes they even have a soft, faint down of gold just barely visible above

the cheekbone. They are good to see.

In winter there are also things to do. The snows come down, and the road out to the main highway becomes impassable to cars for three weeks at a time. Not even the trucks of the A. & P. can get through. So for three whole weeks on end they have to plod their way out on foot, a good three-quarters of a mile, to lay in provisions. The days are full of other work as well. People in cities may think that country life is dull in winter, but that is because they simply do not know. The squire becomes a carpenter. He is working on his play, of course, but in between times he makes furniture. It is good to be able to do something with one's hands. He has a workshop fitted up in the old barn. There he has his studio, too, where he can carry on his intellectual labors undisturbed. The children are forbidden to go there. And every morning, after taking the children to school, the father can return to his barn-studio and have the whole morning free to get on with the play.

It is a fine life for the children, by the way. In summer they play and swim and fish and get wholesome lessons in practical democracy by mingling with the hired man's children. In winter they go to an ex-

cellent private school two miles away. It is run by two very intelligent people, an expert in planned economy and his wife, an expert in child psychology, who between them are carrying on the most remarkable experiments in education.

Life in the country is really full of absorbing interests which city folk know nothing about. For one thing, there is local politics, in which they become passionately involved. They attend all the town meetings, become hotly partisan over the question of a new floor for the bridge across the creek, take sides against old Abner Jones, the head selectman, and in general back up the younger, more progressive element. Over week-ends, they have the most enchanting tales to tell their city friends about these town meetings. They are full of stories, too, about all the natives, and can make the most sophisticated visitor howl with laughter when, after coffee and brandy in the evening, the squire and his wife go through their two-part recital of Seth Freeman's involved squabble and lawsuit with Rob Perkins over a stone fence. One really gets to know his neighbors in the country. It is a whole world in itself. Life here is simple, yet it is good.

II

In their old farmhouse they eat by candlelight at night. The pine paneling in the dining room has been there more than two hundred years. They have not changed it. In fact, the whole front part of the house is just the same as it has always been. All they have added is the new wing for the children. Of course, they had to do a great deal when they bought the place. It had fallen into shocking disrepair. The floors and sills were rotten and had to be replaced. They also built a concrete basement and installed an oil furnace. This was costly, but it was worth the price. The people who had sold them the house were natives of the region who had gone to seed. The farm had been in that one family for five generations. It was incredible, though, to see what they had done to the house. The sitting room floor had been covered with an oilcloth carpet. And in the dining room, right beside this beautiful old Revolutionary china chest, which they had persuaded the people to sell with the house, had been an atrocious phonograph with one of those old-fashioned horns. Can one imagine that?

Of course they had to furnish the house anew from cellar to garret. Their city stuff just wouldn't do at

all. It had taken time and hard work, but by going quietly about the countryside and looking into farmers' houses, they have managed to pick up very cheaply the most exquisite pieces, most of them dating back to Revolutionary times, and now the whole place is in harmony at last. They even drink their beer from pewter mugs. Grace discovered these, covered with cobwebs, in the cellar of an old man's house. He was eighty-seven, he said, and the mugs had belonged to his father before him. He'd never had no use for 'em himself, and if she wanted 'em he calc'lated that twenty cents apiece would be all right. Isn't it delicious! And everyone agrees it is.

The seasons change and melt into one another, and they observe the seasons. They would not like to live in places where no seasons were. The adventure of the seasons is always thrilling. There is the day in late summer when someone sees the first duck flying south, and they know by this token that the autumn of the year has come. Then there is the first snowflake that melts as it falls to usher in the winter. But the most exciting of all is the day in early spring when someone discovers that the first snowdrop has opened or that the first starling has come. They keep a

diary of the seasons, and they write splendid letters to their city friends:

"I think you would like it now. The whole place is simply frantic with spring. I heard a thrush for the first time today. Overnight, almost, our old apple trees have burst into full bloom. If you wait another week, it will be too late. So do come, won't you? You'll love our orchard and our twisted, funny, dear old apple trees. They've been here, most of them, I suspect, for eighty years. It's not like modern orchards, with their little regiments of trees. We don't get many apples. They are small and sharp and tart, and twisted like the trees themselves, and there are never too many of them, but always just enough. Somehow we love them all the better for it. It's so New England."

So year follows year in healthy and happy order. The first year the rock garden gets laid down and the little bulbs and Alpine plants set out. Hollyhocks are sown all over the place, against the house and beside the fences. By the next year they are blooming in gay profusion. It is marvelous how short a time it takes. That second year he builds the studio in the barn, doing most of the work with his own hands, with only the simple assistance of

the hired man. The third year — the children are growing up now; they grow fast in the country — he gets the swimming pool begun. The fourth year it is finished. Meanwhile he is busy on his play, but it goes slowly because there is so much else that has to be done.

The fifth year — well, one does miss the city sometimes. They would never think of going back there to live. This place is wonderful, except for three months in the winter. So this year they are moving in and taking an apartment for the three bad months. Grace, of course, loves music and misses the opera, while he likes the theatre, and it *will* be good to have again the companionship of certain people whom they know. This is the greatest handicap of country life — the natives make fine neighbors, but one sometimes misses the intellectual stimulus of city life. And so this year he has decided to take the old girl in. They'll see the shows and hear the music and renew their acquaintance with old friends and find out what is going on. They might even run down to Bermuda for three weeks in February. Or to Haiti. That's a place, he's heard, that modern life has hardly touched. They have windmills and go in for voodoo worship. It's all savage and most primitively color-

ful. It will get them out of the rut to go off somewhere on a trip. Of course they'll be back in the country by the first of April.

Such is the fugitive pattern in one of its most common manifestations. And always with this race of men the fundamental inner structure of illusion and defeat is the same. All of them betray themselves by the same weaknesses. They flee a world they are not strong enough to meet. If they have talent, it is a talent that is not great enough to win for them the fulfillment and success which they pretend to scorn, but for which each of them would sell the pitifully small remnant of his meager soul. If they want to create, they do not want it hard enough to make and shape and finish something in spite of hell and heartbreak. If they want to work, they do not want it genuinely enough to work and keep on

working till their eyeballs ache and their brains are dizzy, to work until their loins are dry, their vitals hollow, to work until the whole-world reels before them in a grey blur of weariness and depleted energy, to work until their tongues cleave to their mouths and their pulses hammer like dry mallets at their temples, to work until no work is left in them, until there is no rest and no repose, until they cannot sleep, until they can do nothing and can work no more — and then work again.

They are the pallid half-men of the arts, more desolate and damned than if they had been born with no talent at all, more lacking in their lack, possessing half, than if their lack had been complete. And so, half full of purpose, they eventually flee the task they are not equal to — and they potter, tinker, garden, carpenter, and drink.

ODE ON A BOMBING PLANE

ALL hail to man! the gymnast of the sky,
Who falls the lowest when he soars most high,
And, dropping from the clouds red bomb and shell,
Has made of heaven itself a path to hell!

STANTON A. COBLENTZ

HARD FACTS ON AIR POWER

BY MAJOR ALEXANDER P. DE SEVERSKY

A SINGLE automotive manufacturing company proposes the production of 1000 airplanes a day. Not to be outdone in a hard competitive world, other manufacturers promise to match the figure. Someone else raises the ante. Soon our headlines and Sunday feature sections fairly swarm with airplanes, all neatly standardized and equipped with the latest adjectives. If the war for which we are presumably preparing should be fought on typewriters and adding machines, we should win hands down. Unfortunately it must be fought in real time and space, under conditions involving *quality* as well as quantity factors. Unfortunately, too, the simplest warplane is more complex than the most complicated automobile. So let's pull the brakes on runaway rhetoric and face the aeronautic facts of life.

Of course we could turn out 1000 or 5000 planes a day—American productive genius can accomplish almost anything. In theory we could build a final as-

sembly line stretching from coast to coast. But how soon could it be done and, more important, would it meet our need for adequate defense?

It should be noted that arithmetical optimism in this matter of mass production is roughly in inverse ratio to the speaker's distance from the practical job of building and operating warplanes. The American aviation industry itself, which knows most about the problem, is the most modest in making promises. It is at present producing about twenty airplanes a day, yet it must wait for months in some instances for the delivery of aluminum and magnesium alloys and other essential materials. By what magic will the automotive industry step up the flow of such deficit materials by some 5000 per cent? By what industrial sorcery will it be able to get the necessary skilled labor in six months or twelve months? And after the planes are rushed off the belt at such a terrific rate, by what necromancy will we call into being