



## THE BOOK OF TENANTS

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*Drawings by the Author*

**I**T is a convenient way of settling the old dispute as to the relative importance of Oxford and Cambridge, as I have found by experience, to point out that Geoffrey Chaucer, who knew the best wines, wives, and stories of his time, mentions only two Cambridge men to three Oxonians. And the Cantabrigians were only North Country boors whose combined intellectual resources were needed to outwit a mere miller of Trumpington; nor was there any artistry in their triumph. But Chaucer's Oxonians were princes in their way. There was the lean scholar who went in for Aristotle, silence, plain clothes, and moral tales such as that of Grisilde; there was that other quite different clerk whose sweet breath was spent on *Angelus ad virginem* and winning words that won his landlord's wife; and, last of all, the most intriguing of the trio, Jankin, the Wife of Bath's fifth husband. It was Jankin who had the *Book of Wicked Wives*. He read it to his spouse, and richly she deserved to hear it, being of an amorous tooth and inclined to love by the stars she was born under. But it is not my purpose to retell her story, how she lost her patience, how the *Book of Wives* lost three leaves, Jankin his temper, and eventually the control of his wife when she made the most of the blow he gave her.

I merely mention the *Book of Wives* because it puts me in mind of a book I shall write some day myself. I shall never make much of a success of it. The book needs another Chaucer for its author, an artist and a lover of human nature, a genius who can see both the good and the bad and like them both, who can see the goodness of the bad even, who can show how the worst men can sing well or play the guitar well, how a wretch through and through is master enough of the art of living to know that the best chair in the house will be that which the cat is occupying. But I shall do my level best.

My book will be the *Book of Tenants*. The tenants are those my mother has had in her houses these thirty years. She assures me that, should I make any money out of the tenants in my book, I shall be accomplishing more than she has been able to do out of some of them in her houses. But money or not, no matter. These families that have fitted their lives into the walls, — and some of them have done so to the detriment of lathing and plaster, — of our little houses are payment enough in the old currency of human nature.

First will come Mrs. Toothaker. She is proud of being the oldest tenant of all; she rented from my father, and she has never felt quite right about paying the rent to others since he died eighteen years ago. So strongly does she feel on the point that, when last I heard, she was some six years in arrears and still falling behind. She has a husband, but that "poor devil", as she calls him in affection, is no more than another piece of furniture in her house. It is years since she put on the breeches for good and all. The breechless mate gravitates uncertainly in his apologetic lily-pad, that suns have bleached a pale yellow, between the hot blueberry plains of August and the rejected litter of tops and boughs of January clearings. It is Mrs. Toothaker's strong arm that bears up the fortunes of the house. Were it not for her dominion over the wash-tub, there would be no moving pictures for them. They have not missed a change of "pictures" since the first celluloid drama unwound in town with Flora Finch and Vitagraph beauties, deep with dimples and paint. Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, as regular as clockwork, they stream toward the caves of darkness where shadows of life stream silently across the screen. I am sure that Mrs. Toothaker knows no more of Plato than the man in the

moon; but she would not be surprised by his analogy of the cave where we mortals sit and see only shadows of the truth in the beam of light coming in at our backs. And I say stream designedly; for Mrs. Toothaker, reversing the usual procedure among lowly Maine folks, is always three strides in advance of her sheepish spouse.

Mrs. Toothaker it is who is always ready to prepare her neighbors for the worst when sicknesses come. When a neighbor's infant developed whooping-cough, she fled into the street on hearing one fit of coughing, exclaiming that she could not bear to stay and see the poor innocent strangle to death. She bears expert gloomy advice for all ills. She owns a *Home Doctor Book* that pessimistically puts the point of termination of most ailments, after a sufficiently catholic table of symptoms, at any early date and in the graveyard.

Though Mrs. Toothaker is hard put to it to keep the wolf from her rented door, she is a woman who nurses starry hopes. It seems she has, aged as she herself is now and with the wrinkles of seventy Januarys at the corners of her eyes, a mother living. Along with four other children, she hopes to inherit her mother's estate. It is a hungry five-acre patch of junipers and blackberries, and crows have to take their lunch boxes with them when they fly over it, as one can see by the cockle and clam shells that bleach on its ledges; but she lives in hopes. That estate is her New Jerusalem. I hope the day may never come when she inherits the place. For then the cottage that is all jasper and onyx and pearl for her now will turn into a shingled shanty, my mother will have lost her oldest tenant, and the tenant a dream that was life.

If the wolf haunts Mrs. Toothaker's door, then a whole pack of wolves sat on their haunches about the very kitchen range of the Lytumoteedleoddies. That wasn't their name; but it was the inspired one my father gave the family when he saw the mother bringing home a half pound of liver one day to her brood of nine hungry and overgrown boys. And she was bringing it home with a song. But that was in the Summer when, if worst came to worst, children could be turned out to pasture on the blueberry barrens. In the Winter, Mrs. Lytum sang out of the corner of her mouth. She was a widow and she made the most of her widowhood. It

did not matter that her older sons might have manned a brig. She encouraged them in their helplessness. She schooled them in the philosophy of sitting and waiting. If they did get jobs, they were sure to come to grief. John must get his hand punched for a ferrule and come home to centre the family's sympathies upon himself. Ralph must drop a packing-case upon his big toe and draw the neighbors about him.

They were all ill-starred. In the New England phrase, they enjoyed poor health.

Rent was out of the question with the Lytumoteedleoddies. One had rather to feed and clothe them through the months when grasshoppers must beg of the ants. My mother gave them a cord of wood one winter. It was only an hour after its delivery that the widow sent over to ask if I or some other of my brothers might not come over and saw it! Springs and Autumns found the younger of the children in the schools; but Winters they hung shoeless about their dying kitchen blaze. Their blaze was always dying, anyway. It was a way the Lytum blaze had. Once a windfall of wages came to them, and the mother came home from town with five quarts of oysters in a time when oysters were for plutocrats only. That was a true Lytum gesture. The boys would wear French serge in their breeches while I sat on knickers of corduroy, but below their knees the magnificence ended and poverty began in bare legs. They were walking examples of feast and famine cheek by



jowl. If ever I see a grown man going barefoot on the streets and wearing a solitaire stickpin, I shall know him at once for a Lytum-oteedleoddy.

I shall have to give a whole chapter of my book to Seely Ann and her husband Dan. Even then I shall not be able to do them justice. Their luxury was not poverty but religion, and there was an added spice in that they differed in their tastes. Dan was all for a faith smelling of green meads beside still waters. He craved peace. The Sunday night Methodist testimonials were enough for him.

There he grew tearful as he told the temptations that beset one who worked as he worked at the trade of carpentering. He went yearly to the County Fair, all three days of it, if you please; and the sins he amassed in those three days were enough to last him the year out. He had fallen at the sign of the Albino Beauty Show; he had broken the head of a poor negro with a soul as white as yours or mine with the third baseball bought for a nickel, and the cigar he had won thereby had been as ashes to his tongue; he had gambled and gained a "baby-doll" lampshade beside which he had never been able to read with any real comfort since; he had even yearned to bet on the horses as they came leaning around the turn, only he had not known whom one placed a bet with. He was damned. John Bunyan knew the feeling when he reflected on the awful sins of his youth, when he had abandoned himself to playing tunes on the village chimes.

But Seely Ann's religion was of the red flannel kind. The Methodists were altogether too pastoral for her. Indoors was too small for her tremendous fervor. She needed a brass band for a background. So her altar was the street corner, and she worshipped in the clangor of the Salvation Army. She played the bass drum whenever she got the chance. Any other instrument was too thin and anemic for her. Unlike her husband *she* knew she was saved and she announced the fact at the top of her lungs to the world.

But she hungered long between feasts, for the Salvation Army bands visited our town only once or twice a month. Between their visits she took out her zeal upon Dan, admonishing him to leave his sugar and water diet and come to the fountains of milk and honey. When the Salvationists tarried long away, Dan





grew thinner and thinner. Like Pertelote in Chaucer's tale, she wanted a husband to be male through and through. For forebodings of damnation she would advise a strong laxative. Only at revivals did the two really march in step. They followed revivals about the country in their buggy; and for once Dan's religion took on a roseate tint, for the mince pies they carried under them as they rode were enough to make the damned in the lowest circle of ice sing like the cherubim.

Hard by Seely Ann and her Dan's chapter will come Dolor Levesque's. He went as far from salvation as they towards it. He was proud in professing himself an atheist. From some ancestor back in the forests around *Rivière du Loup* whose brain had been darkened by the shadows of pines, he had his fatalistic gloom. He scorned the ministrations of the priest of his ancestral faith, in spite of wife, in spite of children, even at the edge of the grave. And when he came to close his eyes at last, neighbors of the faith whispered that a great black cat was seen to sit upon his chest and to leap out of the window into the night when the cry was raised. But Dolor could make such baskets out of peach pits as a boy would carry in his knickers pocket till the day he put on trousers. And so I know that the Author of all things will forgive him his doubts for his art's sake. No one could really be an atheist who liked boys.

Another tenant will take me back further still into a time when boyhood was very close to babyhood. I can not disentangle now this lady as tenant from this lady as nurse. She seems to have been both.

She was of the stuff the best nurses are made the wide world over; she was Scotch. I can not remember how she looked; but I can still hear her voice, which was kinsman to the sleepy crickets and the far whippoorwill, telling the stories that sooner or later turned to dreams. She filled my brains with witches and goblins, unicorns and shyer things. She was one of those rare ladies who have seen a fairy and can tell you how it looks, with dresses like a shimmer of grass on a hot June day before the mowers have had their will. She could sing, too, in a voice that had not faded with her hair. She went behind the rich old Scotch songs all the world sings. She told one the meaning of the "high road" in *Lock Lomond*; one saw the girl following the lover who for

Bonnie Charlie's sake was being brought home in his coffin on the shoulders of his friends. One of her songs I found long afterwards, in a more colorful and richer version, in a collection of ballads. Her song was a pathetic ghost of an old ballad that had lingered on without being captured and put into print at its richest, that had lost its glamor and moonshine and faded out in the harsh light of modern civilization when words are so cheap and drab. It ran partly like this:

Last night I slept on a warm featherbed  
Along beside my Davy.  
To-night I sleep on the cold, cold ground  
Along by the Gypsy Tavy.

To this had the Earl of Casselis's Lady come! But the song served its purpose and it brought me to sleep sooner than the coming out of the Summer stars. Surely a tenant who paid her rent in sleep was a rare and blessed one to have!

There was the lady of two husbands. I was too young, when she sojourned under a roof of ours, to know of ladies like Iseult. And had I known of them, I should not naturally have thought of the white-armed lovely one out of Ireland. For our lady was anything but lovely. But there she was with two husbands, — the neighbors said so.

One was plain husband. He, she confided in one of her acquaintances, built ships. Surely here was a man for a story! But when one came to inquire further, one learned that he worked as one of the innumerable ants in the shipyards of a nearby port. He drove rivets or something of that monotonous sort. As well call a worker in a modern shoe factory a maker of shoes! So, perhaps, the lady could not be utterly condemned for taking unto herself what neighborhood gossip termed a "fancy man". He was Mr. Husband. He came to be with her when plain husband was at his rivets.

I wonder if Mark of Cornwall did something plain and usual all the livelong day and so deserved to have Tristram come, who could cut up the red deer like an artist with all the chivalric flourishes and play on the harp till the stars came out in one's mind?

Strange, far-off lady of two loves, no poet has made sin a



shining thing for her! But I remember that she could make tarts that made the other tarts of this universe things heavy and hard; and, more than that, she made them to give away. Tarts or boxes of precious ointments, the kindnesses of the world make us clean.

So the list grows and grows. I guess it will run to more than one volume, this book of mine. For how else shall I ever be able to get in the family of ten boys and one girl, thrown in for good measure to civilize and tame the males? Each one of the lot was as different and cranky and lovable as any wearer-out of shoes could be.

I have climbed trees for young crows with this one; I have smoked my first corn-silk with that. The father was a man right out of Homer or *Tristram Shandy*. He lived on his prejudices; he nursed his Cockney cocksureness until, with some aid of alcoholic nutriment, he came to be the demigod of all the boys for miles around. He it was who insisted on putting the kitchen range out of the house, fire and all, when it smoked and clouded the amber of his richly irrigated Saturday night mood. He had fire enough in him, then. Could a boy desire more in a hero? He was the one who with his own hands set free the skunk his offspring had trapped. (There had been nothing like this along Fleet Street!) So his clothes had to be interred. He will live as long as the village tongues can wag in his immortal command to his first-born: "Go drive the rooster out of the barn afore it lays!" By that same word, if the derivation of Cockney from *cock's egg* can be used as a witness, he was immortally right and true to his London.

His wife deserves a portion of a volume at least as great as that Mrs. Shandy occupies; for she, like Mrs. Shandy, was all-powerful by virtue of saying nothing and of obliterating herself so much that she brought out the worst in her husband. Such women have made us males the despots that we are!

And there was the man who had read cheap Western tales till he went about in a sombrero and came at the call of "colonel". There was the poor teamster whose hungry horses ate up their carts and harness and so could pull no more but only eat on until they ate up themselves. There was the man who whittled out ships for us boys until his trousers wore through at their points of contact with his seat. There was the man who put his all in a

portable sawmill and tried to salvage the fly-wheel when the thing blew up. There were the inspired boys who made a neighbors' pigsty into an up-to date ice-house and froze the pigs to death in their zeal.

There were. . . .

Across the way from my mother's house there is a very fine college. I went there, later on, and learned what I could. But I am very sure that I never learned there one-hundredth part of the art of living and the art of being a human being and enjoying it that I learned in the University of Tenants which lay all about our house when I was a boy. So, however little some of the tenants may have paid to keep me in stockings and shoes, they paid me very well in furnishing my mind. And I am going to dedicate my book to them.



## AN OLDER BROTHER OF OURS

SAMUEL MCCOY

*Forum Americana Series — IX*

**H**E was a strange personage. I say "strange" because the lives which he and his neighbors lived were of a sort wholly unfamiliar to most of us to-day. I say "personage" because he was just that, — a Personage. He was not rich. He was not educated, in our sense of the word. He exerted no influence outside his own family. His name was unknown ten miles from his own hearthstone. And yet he was so thoroughly American, his life so rich, so warm, so fruitful, and he himself so intimately related to all of us who are living to-day, that I can not think of him except with deep affection and respect.

All that I know about him comes from one book, — a book which he wrote himself, but which was never printed. There is only one copy of the book in existence. It belongs to me. But it belongs also to every one in America, — for its author was so certainly an older brother of ours. A word as to how this book, buried for a century, came again to life may not be amiss.

Well! It was an American dowered with the heritage of sturdy pioneer stock, — proud of the fact that for nearly two hundred years his forbears had been American; proud of the fact that they had been Pennsylvanians and Virginians even before the founding of the republic; and yet troubled and tantalized by the realization that he knew of no place where he might find any least material record of their existence, — who discovered the man and the book which I wish to describe.

He had been born and had lived until a year or two ago in the Middle West. Then chance brought him to the East. In a sense, the journey was a retracing of the journeyings which had led his forbears, generations before, from the Atlantic seaboard westward stage by stage, following the receding frontier. He came into old American towns, — Concord, old Salem, — with an inward exaltation, like that of a discoverer. He had never seen any such places. But somewhere, buried deep beneath a century and a half of superimposed fibres, this background existed and he knew it