

# The Todds of Westmore Hill

by ISABEL R. A. CURRIER

I

MIS' TODD hadn't been off Westmore Hill for forty-two years. She hadn't ever been out of Vermont in her life. That was why she wasn't much of a hand to talk. She never got to do any visiting unless a neighbor-farmer was up her way hunting stray calves. Once in a while berry pickers from Island Pond would cut through Todd's woodlot, but Mis' Todd never had any traffic with them. She would be hoeing, likely, in the potato patch; or she would be driving the horse rake in the upper field when they went by; and she would stop and shade her eyes with her hand and look at them, but she never spoke.

Folks always looked hard at her. She was a little wisp of a woman burnt almost molasses color. Her hair was like pulled taffy in streaks and gray for the rest of it. Strings of it fell down over her face. Mis' Simpson, who lived on the old Haynes' place above Todd's sugar orchard, said likely Mis' Todd hadn't washed her hair for years, but that was guesswork. Mis' Todd was clean. She always wore a blue denim overall frock of Ira's, and her skirt was dark blue calico with white spots. She had all her teeth, and they were white.

In the wintertime, if straw-riding parties went up Westmore Hill, they looked to see a light in the Todd woodshed where Mis' Todd would be splitting wood at all hours. Old Ira never did as much around the place as she did. He worked his woman like a dog — beat her, too. He beat horses and women and puny men. Folks wondered how she stood it, with no

woman folks to run to, and nobody to fend for her.

She was a slip of a girl when Ira went down to Charleston and married her and fetched her up to his father's old place. She'd been pretty, Grandsire Simpson said. He was the only one who knew her when she used to traffic with people, and he's been dead a long time. If it hadn't been for Grandsire Simpson, Mis' Todd would have died when Curtis was born. Old Simpson was going by with a team and a load of logs, and he heard her holler in the house, and he went in. She was all alone without a fire, and the baby was coming. Ira was off in St. Johnsbury buying sugar buckets. Grandsire Simpson had to help her; there wasn't time to get a woman. He said she had a hard time and the baby's head got squeezed getting born. Mis' Todd told him she would name the baby after him, and she did.



Drawings by Georges Schreiber

Curtis was an idiot. He was forty years old and he never said anything. Just laughed, kind of hollowlike; or stared with his mouth open. Mis' Todd had to take Curtis's beatings for herself. Ira had no patience with people when they weren't working, and it was hard to make Curtis understand how to work, although he was big and strong enough.

The Simpsons, and the Burroughs — two miles down by the East Burke road — were the only neighbors. They got out of the habit of going to see Mis' Todd because she never acted like she wanted them, and she never went visiting herself.

It was July when Ira Todd was struck by

lightning. Or maybe it was August. He wasn't really struck by lightning, but he was walking through the woodlot and a tree was struck. The tree broke off above the third branch and came down on Ira. It was a monstrous big tree. Must have killed him quick as a whistle.

The Simpsons thought they must be seeing things when Mis' Todd came walking up onto their kitchen porch.

"Well, my land of livin', if it ain't Mis' Todd," Mis' Simpson said. "Come right in."

Mis' Simpson was canning her raspberries, so it must have been July.

Mis' Todd didn't go in.

"He got hit by a tree," she said.

That's all she said — just that way: "He got hit by a tree."

"Curtis did?" Mis' Simpson said.

"Ira." Mis' Todd said.

"Is he hurt bad?" Ed Simpson asked. Ed had been washing up in the kitchen and listening.

"He's dead," Mis' Todd said.

"Oh, my land of livin'," Mis' Simpson said. "Come right in, Mis' Todd!"

Mis' Todd stayed standing there.

"I can drag him out if you can lift the tree," she said to Ed.

"I'll hitch up Nellie," Ed said. "'Twon't take a minute, and it'll save a lot of steps."

He went up to the barn, running, and Mis' Simpson came onto the kitchen porch with Mis' Todd.

"I'll come, too," she said. She was excited. "Wish I could let the Burroughs know. My land of livin', what'll you do, Mis' Todd? My land of livin', a body never knows when his time'll come, does he? Why, I saw Ira this mornin' when I went up to the oat field with some ginger water for Ed. He was layin' into Curtis with his hoe handle up in the turnip field. I thought somethin' ought to be done about it, but Curtis is a man grown. . . . How'd it happen?"

"What's them flowers?" Mis' Todd said, like she hadn't heard a word.

"Them? Why them's sweet peas. They're late. Don't tell me you don't know sweet peas!"

Ed came out of the barn with Nellie all harnessed, and hitched her to the buckboard.

"There ain't room for you, Emma," he said to Mis' Simpson.

Mis' Todd got in and they drove away.

## II

**E**D SAID Ira was an awful mess. His head was gashed clean open and all spilled out. Mis' Todd took him by the shoulders and pulled him out from under the tree while Ed and Curtis lifted the tree with a cant dog. Ed said Curtis kept chuckling like he was at a church picnic. Ed said it gave him the creeps.

They carried Ira in the house, and Ed went down to the Four Corners to telephone to Island Pond.

Mis' Todd was hammering in the woodshed when he got back.

The sheriff came out, and the doctor, and John Thomas. He was the coroner, and he said Ed ought to have known better than to move Ira. He said Mis' Todd couldn't be expected to know, but Ed ought to have.

Harry Phelps, the undertaker, came. He said he'd see about the burying. They all went out to where the tree had fallen. Mis' Todd left them standing there and went off, and when they got back to the house they heard her in the woodshed again. She was nailing some planed boards together.

"I'm aimin' for you to bury Ira in this," she said.

The men looked at each other, but couldn't think of anything to say, so Ed Simpson said:

"I'll help you, Mis' Todd," and started to take the buck-saw to cut up board.

"I can do it," Mis' Todd said, so they went out and left her.

They went in the house to help the undertaker, and when they came out toward night, Mis' Todd was sitting on the front steps. Curtis was with her, and the men wondered where he'd been all afternoon.

"We'll take the box down to Island Pond in the wagon," the sheriff said. "We'll bury Ira to-morrow."

"You tend to it," Mis' Todd said. "Curtis and me can't go down."

The men argued with her for a while. It was like they were talking to themselves. She never answered them. So Ed and Mis' Simpson, and the Simpson young-ones and the Burroughs were all that were at the funeral.

Ed and Mis' Simpson drove up to see Mis' Todd that night, and brought her a pie.

"What you goin' to do?" Ed asked Mis' Todd.

"Well," Mis' Todd said, slow. "I'll have to do the mowin' and see to the potatoes. Maybe we'll lose some of the turnips. I won't have much time for hoein'."

"Ain't you goin' to hire a man?" Ed said.

"You ought to go down to Island Pond and see Lawyer Ryan about Ira's affairs," Mis' Simpson said.

Mis' Todd looked kind of bright for once.

"I guess I will go down," she said. "They's a railroad down there, ain't they?"

"Land sakes! They's been a railroad there for forty years," Ed said.

"I ain't seen it," Mis' Todd said.

"My land of livin'," Mis' Simpson said. "Ain't you never seen a railroad?"

"No," Mis' Todd said. Then she went on talking like she was interested.

"I've had a hankerin' to see it for a spell," she said. "Ira rid on it two or three times. I guess I'll go see it."

"Well, I should think you would," Mis' Simpson said. "Where you been that you ain't seen a railroad?"

"I been on this farm forty-two years," Mis' Todd said. "I reckon I'll go see the railroad."

Curtis came up from the barn where he'd been bedding the cows.

"I've stayed pretty close to fend for Curtis," Mis' Todd said, kind of fast. "There wa'n't nobody to fend for him. I reckon he'd be all right a day if I went to Island Pond to see the railroad."

Mis' Simpson said she felt kind of a lump in her throat, and Ed, he was coughing.

"I'll take you to Island Pond, Mis' Todd," Ed said.

"We'll take you, Mis' Todd," Mis' Simpson said. "We'll all have a holiday."

"No, I can go alone," Mis' Todd said.

"But you ain't got a horse," Ed said.

Ira never bought anything while he could borrow or hire.

"I was aimin' to walk," Mis' Todd said.

"It's nine mile," Ed said.

"That ain't no walk," Mis' Todd said.

She went on talking. The Simpsons never knew she knew that many words.

"I'll take me a lunch," she said. "It must be a pretty walk down to Island Pond. Is Island Pond awful big?"

"Well, they's 3000 people or better," Ed said.

Mis' Todd looked scared.

"Do you reckon I'd get lost?" she said.

"My land of livin', no!" Mis' Simpson said.

"It ain't that big."

Well, sir, the very next day the Simpsons saw Mis' Todd go by. She had on a black skirt that had got rusted and she had on Ira's old peanut straw hay-ing hat. It set 'way down on her head. She had a newspaper parcel — likely her lunch. She looked spry, and waved when she went by, but she went right along and they didn't bother her.

At noontime she was sitting on the culvert in front of Warren's eating a piece of bread and cold salt pork when Jim Warren came along.

"Why, Mis' Todd," he said, "it seems funny to see you 'way down here."

"I'm goin' to Island Pond to see the railroad," Mis' Todd said.

Jim didn't know what she meant, and thought she might be a little light on account of Ira, you know, and the way she had been alone for so long.

"You come right up and set in with us," he said. "We ain't had dinner."

Mis' Todd went up, and she sat in and ate dinner with the Warrens and the hired men, and she never spoke one living word all the time. All she said was when she went in. She looked at Mis' Warren and said:

"I'm goin' to Island Pond to see the railroad."

Well, the Warrens kept talking out of wanting to say something, and the hired men just ate and went out. After dinner, Mis' Todd



helped clear, and she dried the dishes for Mis' Warren. Then she put on that hat of Ira's, and went to the door.

She turned around at the door, and said to Mis' Warren:

"Come and see me next week. Curtis and I are a-goin' to kill a hen."

That's the only time that Mis' Todd ever invited anyone to come and see her.

Then she walked off down the road.

### III

SHE MUST have got to Island Pond about four o'clock, because quite a few remembered seeing her but nobody knew her. It seems like she just went on down Derby Street, stopping and looking around and gaping at the houses and the people. When somebody'd look right at her, sharp, she'd kind of smile, but she never said anything, and they didn't.

On Cross Street she met John Thomas.

"Well, I'm glad to see you, Mis' Todd," he said.

"I come to see the railroad," she said.

"Haven't you seen it?" John Thomas said.

"No, I ain't never," she said. "Is that it that I can hear?"

"Yes, that's an engine," John Thomas said.

She was kind of shaking a little. John Thomas thought he'd like to be with her the first time she saw the railroad. It seemed foolish for her not to have seen it, when the railroad had been through Island Pond for forty years.

"Can't I walk along with you, Mis' Todd?" he said.

"I wish you'd show me where the railroad is," she said to him.

"Well, it's just at the end of this street," he said. "You'll come in sight of it in a minute. You can see the station from here."

"Will I see it all at once?" she asked him — for all the world, he said, like his grandson when they had a Christmas tree.

"I tell you what," he said, joking, "you take hold of my arm and shut your eyes and I'll tell you to open them when we get down to the station."

He said he was never so surprised in his life as when she took hold of his arm and said:

"They're shut. Can we go now?"

He led her down Cross Street, and he said he was figuring on the way of driving her back up

to Westmore Hill. It wasn't more than two minutes' walk to the station, and when they got over to the platform he told her to step up, and she stepped up. He said there was a yard engine shunting around and the bell was ringing, and she just hung to his arm like it was all that kept her in life. He said she kind of hurt his arm.

He got her in front of the station on the platform, and said:

"Now open your eyes, Mis' Todd."

He watched her, and she opened her eyes, slow, and she looked at the box cars and the eight tracks, and she kind of choked her breath.

John Thomas said her face looked like a little girl's. She stood and looked at the tracks, and John said he felt kind of bashful about saying anything, so he just stood and looked at them, too.

Then she let go of his arm and ran to the edge of the platform, and bent down and touched the rail.

She looked back at John Thomas and laughed right out loud.

"Ain't it shiny?" she said.

Then she stood up and stepped onto the track and looked up and down and across, and looked and looked. John Thomas thought she'd never get tired of looking.

The agent came out, and John told him who Mis' Todd was, and how she had never seen the railroad before. He wasn't paying much attention to Mis' Todd, and all of a sudden the agent yelled:

"Look out," he hollered.

John Thomas looked and there was the yard engine shunting down the third track and Mis' Todd had wandered over there. It was coming pretty fast, and Elmer Hughes, the engineer, blew his whistle like mad.

"Look out," Thomas yelled, and Mis' Todd couldn't hear him.

She stood there just looking at the engine. Her mouth was kind of open and she had thrown her head back. I suppose she was taken with how big the engine was. Her face was all excited-looking.

It was all over in less than a minute. Mis' Todd never turned a hair. She stood square in the middle of the track, and faced that engine until it hit her.

They took Curtis to the County Farm.



# The New School Trend

*Sows' Ears from Silk Purses*

by FLORENCE SYKES MELLOR

**F**OUR years ago and within four months of graduation from college, I was engaged to teach French in a delightful old school, a private institution of considerable reputation, which had prepared for college and for the business of living, the mothers and even grandmothers of many of the children then attending. My associates were to be women of culture and ability and my pupils a choice group, born into cultivated families, encouraged in what we term the finer things, endowed for the most part with better than average intelligence and abundant good health. Here was the ideal opportunity for a young and enthusiastic teacher, as yet without fixed theories of education.

Every school day I taught French, lived French, beginning with little folks of six and seven who mimicked perfectly every sound, and ending with high school girls, self-conscious and afraid of being conspicuous in a new language. With the little ones, everything was not all sunshine, of course, for they fought on occasions and insulted each other in a thousand cruel, childish ways — but they did want to learn.

Past the fourth grade, however, trouble began. The difficulty is, I believe, that just then everything else began — music lessons and practicing, dancing, elocution, riding, and any number of other activities, all more exciting, more striking in their appeal than geography or arithmetic or French. The parties, the weekends, the movies — all vied with the teacher, who consciously fought a losing battle. The only thing left to do was to make school itself into a stunt party. We didn't actually pin the tail on the donkey, but we were urged to do quite as ridiculous things in a vain attempt to "make it interesting."

The geography-history teacher openly re-

belled at having to adopt the new-fangled methods pressed upon us by our superiors. She had taught successfully and inspiringly for more than twenty years, and under her direction geography and history held romance for the better-brained even when no cheap side-show tactics were resorted to. Wishing to be open to conviction, however, she spent much time on all the supposedly "interesting" facts about Pilgrim life, but by the end of the year the class could not tell whether the Pilgrims were in Michigan or Massachusetts, and such an important matter as the Mayflower Compact did not remain in their heads at all, even though they had dramatized the signing of it — in costume.

My children worked and liked it. Not knowing a word of French when they came to me, in a seemingly short time they were greeting me with sentences, simple to be sure, but grammatical and complete. They delighted the school with plays in the foreign tongue. I heard them singing and saying snatches of French to each other in the school yard, and their mothers reported that they were amazed at the proudly displayed accomplishments of their offspring. And I had never thought of method.

These method-conscious educators, I find, are almost entirely maiden ladies, well past forty, who are frightened to death of appearing old-fashioned and "set." The young teachers, as yet uncrystallized, and impatient to work with the children in their care, are not persuaded by the shoddy results of the ultra-new. No one of them is for the ultra-old, either. No one of them would make your child learn the 17 table, but she does know he'll have need all his life for the 5 and the 6 and he may as well learn them by heart, formally,  $5 \times 1$  equals,  $5 \times 2$  equals. Children like to work; don't make them think it is play. *Work is not play*, as all of