

THE REAL ESTATE AGENT'S TALE

BY AMY LOWELL

THE furniture goes with the house. Oh, yes.
There ain't no silver, but silver's never let,
At least I never heard of that being done.
There's lots of dishes though, and only a few
Are cracked or chipped, the owner was very careful.
She washed her plates as though they were her babies,
And everything's spick and span, just as she left it.
Maybe you'll want a little bit more comfort
In your chairs. But you can send up one or two
If these don't suit, and probably a spring sofa
For the sitting-room, the one there's hard as nails
And I don't fancy you'll like its horse-hair cover,
Folks don't to-day. My wife couldn't abide ours,
We broke it up for fire-wood long ago.
It's a pretty place, the more you look it over,
And the rent is very reasonable indeed.
Now just you let me make a note or two:
You'll take it as it stands without the sofa,
And you don't want the bed in the East Chamber,
Nor the kitchen things, and you do want an ice-chest.
Nothing more? Well, now, there's just one thing
Which may surprise you, but I wouldn't keep
That clock if I was you. Oh, it goes all right.
It hasn't missed its strike in fifty years.
I've come here every Sunday and wound it up,
Sam Gould, Miss Bartlett's nephew, told me to.
He's all that's left of the family, he and the clock,
But I don't notice he's sent for it to Boston.
It's a very handsome thing, the sort that dealers
Hunting old furniture can't get enough of—
We have a good few of the tribe up here,
Nosing about whenever there's an auction—
But for all that I wouldn't want it round.
I guess I'm mighty poor at real estating
To say a thing like that, but still I wouldn't,
Not if 'twas me. You needn't laugh, Mr. Brooks,

I've got a funny feeling about that clock.
I want to let it stop, and tie a rope
Around it good and tight just where the wood
Juts out to hold the face, and then I want
To hang it up in the old apple-tree
Outside my office and let it swing and rot
With snow, and rain, and sun, until it drops.
You think I'm mad, I guess. Well, Sir, I'm not.
But I've got my own ideas about that clock.
It's a whole hour to train time, if you care
To hear why I feel so, I'll tell you why.
That clock's been in the Bartlett family
Time out of mind, ever since Simon Bartlett
Brought it from England on one of his long voyages,
The longest voyage he ever took and the last.
He was captain of a ship trading the Indies,
Not the West Indies, of course you understand,
But the other Indies, off around Cape Horn.
This time he'd been away above two years
And back he came, slapping along as fast
As winds would blow him, expecting to be married
Soon as his ship had got her anchor down.
The war of eighteen-twelve was on and booming,
But Cap'n Si didn't know a thing about it,
Until a British ship fired plunk at him.
He made what fight he could with only muskets,
But the British ship had a bellyful of cannon,
And pretty soon 'twas strike or go down flyin',
So Cap'n Si, being prudent, hauled his flag.
They put a prize crew on him just for luck,
And off he went under the Union Jack,
And found himself clapped into Dartmoor jail,
With no way of sending word back to his Sweetheart
That he wasn't hobnobbing down with Davy Jones.
They let him out after the war was over.
He'd made some money carving little toys,
For sailors in those days knew how to whittle
And visitors were always keen on buying,
And I guess he had some more sewed in his clothes
The warden had overlooked. But all his keepsakes
Were gone, the presents he was bringing home
To give his bride. He wouldn't come empty-handed,
He bought this clock, now he had time again,
It seemed to him time had been all choked up,

Clogged somehow, like the wheels of a dirty watch,
While he had been in prison. He might have thought
Amanda would have married, but he didn't,
And she hadn't. So that at least was right as rain,
And they set up housekeeping with the clock.
You bet he wound it every week, he wouldn't
Have let it stop for a hundred thousand dollars.
He'd got time back, and he meant to hold on to it.
He did, being over a hundred when he died.
And I don't suppose the jail seemed more than five minutes
When he looked back. He'd given up sea-faring
And moved quite a ways inland, to Nashua,
And then on here to Franklin. Here he stuck,
And here his folks have been sticking ever since,
Till Sam Gould went away and Miss Bartlett died.
The Bartlett family just lived by that clock.
You never caught one of them being late
For meals, or getting up, or going to bed.
The clock was in at all the goings on.
No Bartlett woman was married from a church,
They used to stand the minister in front
Of the clock to marry them, and all the guests
Looked right into that clock face all the time
The wedding was going on, and ten to one
The clock would strike and you couldn't hear a thing
Was said. It was the same with christenings.
Every Bartlett baby was baptized
In front of the clock, and every Bartlett corpse
Got prayed off into Heaven with that clock
Tick-tocking up above, and striking too,
Funerals weren't more serious to Bartletts
Than the clock's striking. I've heard my mother say
They purposely arranged to have it so.
It really was uncanny how their lives
Moved and circled about that grim old clock.
Bartletts were born, and Bartletts died, but the clock
Was always the same, it never changed a bit.
When I was a boy I used to come with Sam
And stand for hours watching those rocking ships
Up there. But when Sam's father died and I
Saw those ships rocking up above his coffin
They turned me sort of sick, I wanted to smash them.
That clock was treated as if it was alive,
And there it stood, grinning with all its ships,

Not caring a brass farthing what occurred
To any one. I got a hunch that day
That the clock had a nasty soul, that it liked to watch
The family like puppets in a show
And that some day it would get bored and do
Some horrid thing. It was a curious fancy,
Wasn't it? But maybe I was righter
Than I could ever dare believe I was.
The Bartletts owned a lot of land round here,
Old Si had spread himself when it came to land.
Some of it was farm, some woodland, some was nothing,
And kept as such for a full century.
I guess the Captain started the first store
They had here. He did a thriving trade
In groceries, and calicoes, and hardware,
But somehow the family drifted out of business
And long before my day they'd sold the store
And only kept the farm. But the new West
Cut farming into bits all through this country.
Only some folks don't know when they've had enough
And the Bartlett family hated change like poison.
George Bartlett, having only girls, the neighbours
Used to wonder what would happen when he died.
At first, of course, they thought the girls would marry,
And Jane, the youngest, did—but not a farmer,
Her husband was the doctor here, and a good one,
But country practice ain't a roarin' gold mine.
Still it kept them, and Jerusha found a man
To rent the farm, and things went on like that
For a good many years. Then the doctor died
And left his wife and Sam without a cent.
Jerusha took them in, but the farm rent
Didn't go far with three of them, so Jerusha
Sold off her wood; not the land, you understand,
But the trees on it. The Diamond Match people
Sent saw-mills in and cut down everything.
There were miles and miles looked like the Day of Judgment,
Stumps, and dead twigs, and rotting chips, and cinders.
The city folks were mad as hops about it,
But if Jerusha cared she didn't say so.
I went to Hanover about that time,
And then to Law School. How they got the money
To send Sam down to study pharmacy,
I've only just found out. They borrowed it,

And at enormous interest. By that time
Sam's mother had died, and there was just those two,
Sam and Miss Bartlett, with the measly farm rent
To carry them. Miss Bartlett made it do,
Pinching along on next to nothing here
Till Sam got his diploma. Just a year
After he'd started working in a drug-store,
The man who rented the farm got sick and died.
And there was poor Miss Bartlett with no money,
Not a single dollar bill that she could count on,
And owning acres and acres of useless land!
If dirt was only dollars now—but it isn't.
Land-poor she was, and a very bad case of it.
Of course she meant to let the farm again,
But no one wanted it, and her wood land
Was nothing but a six years' growth of saplings.
One afternoon Miss Bartlett sent me word
She wanted to see me. So I went right down
And had a talk with her. She told me everything
And asked me whether I could sell her land.
I didn't think I could, and said so frankly.
"Martin," says she, "I'll give you just six months,
If it ain't sold then, I know what I will do."
Now she might have meant she'd join Sam in the city,
Or take in washing, or go out for a housekeeper.
But she didn't mean any of those things,
She meant she'd kill herself. I don't know how
I got that, but I did. She might sell land,
The same as you might have your teeth pulled out,
But she couldn't leave that house. It seemed to me
As though she and the clock were wound together
And the house was the shell of both. The clock was ticking
In the silence that followed after she had spoken.
It ticked so loud I heard it in the parlour
Where we were sitting. It seemed as though her heart
Was ticking with it somehow, or that what
I listened to was not the clock at all
But her heart beating, pounding on the silence
To break it down. 'Twas fearfully uncanny,
And when I left her and went into the entry
There were those everlasting ships rocking and rocking,
And telling me something plainly all the time.
I couldn't pass them, and I got the notion
That they were shouting at me I could sell

The old land if I dared—just if I dared.
I hauled my feet away at last, and when
I got outside I called myself some names
I wouldn't like another man to call me.
I thought I knew the clock was only fancy,
But I couldn't shake the idea of Miss Bartlett.
I knew I'd got that right, it was suicide
She had in mind. You bet I didn't leave
A stone unturned about selling that land.
I advertised it out of my own pocket.
Five months went by and I was almost crazy,
And then one morning I landed a customer.
He was rich as mud and mad as a March Hare,
He wanted rural solitude, he said.
I told him he would find it at the farm
And he agreed he should. But, mad as he was,
I couldn't plant on him a single acre
Of that poor spindly, second-growth wood land.
What ever had been the farm he wanted badly,
But he wouldn't touch a yard of anything else.
I didn't blame him, the wood lots were a sight,
And 'twas luck you couldn't see them from the farm-house.
For Miss Jerusha couldn't touch the farm trees
They being rented at the time, you remember.
I tell you, Sir, I simply soaked that fellow,
I made him pay twice what the farm was worth.
And he stood for it, he liked the place so much.
Well, that was that, and he had signed the deed
A good two weeks before the month was up.
It was a Saturday I took it over
To get Miss Bartlett's signature. I can't forget
How quiet and genteel the old house looked,
With the lilacs by the door all in full bloom
And the window-beds with their red-and-yellow tulips
The way they'd always been. When I was a boy
I never could pass that yard without looking in
To see Miss Bartlett's flowers and sniff the scent of them.
I used to smell it for hours afterwards.
I felt as though I'd gained a lot of time
That day and I didn't hurry to ring the bell.
But when I did, and Miss Bartlett opened the door,
The entry seemed as black as pitch to me
Coming in from the sunlight, and the tick
Of that infernal clock seemed to break the air

The same as you break water skipping pebbles,
I could scarcely hear Miss Bartlett greeting me,
And when I looked at her I half expected
To see the ships rocking upon her forehead.
I got myself together in a minute
And gave her the papers and showed her where to sign them.
It took an age, I thought, and then I found
That I was breathing in time to the ticking clock
And counting—counting. I'd got to eighteen hundred
Before she finished. Then I tried to say
Something appropriate, but nothing came.
Miss Bartlett was like an image run inside
By clockwork. Her face was wax—wax-white,
And wax-still too, she thanked me like a doll
Who speaks because you press it.
I'd saved her life, perhaps, and yet I seemed
To be pressing it out at the very instant.
At any rate, there was nothing more to do
And I got up. Miss Bartlett got up with me
And walked to the door, and for some sudden reason
Turned round and went directly to the clock.
She had the papers still, and she held them up
Before the clock-face with a curious gesture,
Defiance it might have been, or supplication.
It had a nasty look to me, the way
She braced herself and cringed at the same time,
Like I was watching some beastly ceremony,
With torture in it and things one wouldn't think of,
I might be seeing a heathen devotee
Making oblation to a heathen god,
A wood and metal thing without a soul
But furious with abominable intention.
Ten breaths I counted before the clock fell over.
It started to strike, then with a hideous screech
Of grating wheels and rapping bells, it tottered,
Poised on its edge and suddenly came down
And crashed Miss Bartlett with it to the floor.
I got it off her somehow, she was breathing
And muttering something. When I stooped to hear,
She whispered, "Go and put the clock up, Martin.
Put it up before you touch me." And I did.
And you would have done the same, Sir. All she wanted
Was to see that clock in place before she died.
She saw it so, but when I went to lift her

I did not lift Miss Bartlett, but a corpse
With hands and feet already growing cold.
But nothing ailed the clock. I looked at it,
Its ships were rocking, cool as cucumbers,
Over and back, over and back. I carried
Miss Bartlett into the parlour and laid her down
On the sofa, and I could hardly pass the clock
For loathing, and a sort of fear, I guess.
I passed it twice, and it was ticking softly
And purring too, it might have been a cat,
When I went out to call the doctor. They tell me
It was the wires jarring, but I know better.
Well, now you know the story, you can choose
Whether you want the clock or not. I thought so.
You'll never make me think it didn't kill her,
If there are homicidal clocks or no.
It may be foolishness, but I believe it,
Believe that clock has got a sort of mania.
If it were mine, I'd smash the case to pieces
And bury the works out under those rank saplings,
But Sam will have a word to say to that.
And now, Sir, we'll be starting for the train.

AMY LOWELL.

NEW BOOKS REVIEWED

LINCOLN THE AMERICAN

ABRAHAM LINCOLN: THE PRAIRIE YEARS. By Carl Sandburg. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

In these two volumes Carl Sandburg has made a vividly human portrait of Lincoln with a richly peopled background. And sometimes the background comes out of the frame. Nevertheless with few new facts or incidents, and with no pretence of novelty of interpretation, he has drawn a picture that for vitality, realism, sympathy and discrimination, holds attention and commands respect.

The author, himself a son of the prairie, has attempted to sketch, and in a measure explain, his hero in terms of heritage and environment. By episode rather than steady narrative he brings before us the panorama of Western life, which entered into the fibre of Lincoln's habits and character. Often he suggests a bard sitting before a rude fireplace chanting his hero tale with a poet's repetitions and refrains, his sentences and characterizations recurring again and again for rhetorical effect. Then, piling stroke on stroke of fact, he will plunge into a very "catalogue of the ships" with detailed lists of crops or game animals, or an inventory of a grocery shelf, to give concreteness to his story. Some obvious slips need correction in any new edition, such for instance as a quotation from De Tocqueville ascribed to Montesquieu, and the repeated error in the name of Chief Justice David K. Cartter, who stuttered in his spelling as well as his speech. Poetic rhapsody should also restrain itself from such flights as making Nancy Hanks sing "From Greenland's Icy Mountains", when she died before Bishop Heber wrote it. The lyrical strain is at times a trifle overpowering, especially in the earlier chapters dealing with Lincoln's boyhood, with Lucy and Nancy Hanks, the romance of Ann Rutledge, and the possible roots of