

Turned Out to Grass

BY GEORGIA WOOD PANGBORN

JOHN BLAISDELL looked out over the soft-bosomed mountains, glimmering river, and crude green of a near strip of woodland which made up the "view" from Walter Harkness's new house, and said, "I envy you."

If the passion of envy always left a man's face so placidly kind, it would hardly need placing on the list of deadly sins. Perhaps he should have said "congratulate," yet that would not have been all the truth. No,—it was envy, rarefied and harmless.

The city lay behind him like a foul dream. The murky office where he had worked half-heartedly these many empty years—he thought of it with the distaste of one who has cracked a bad nut between his teeth. And the heat! He had fled to the hills that morning with the consciousness of heat apoplexy perched upon his shoulder like black care, not leaving him until he tumbled into the inchoate but welcoming bosom of the Harkness family, saying feebly, "I—thought you wouldn't mind." Harkness, having relieved him of collar and coat, stretched him in a hammock on the unfinished veranda, where Mrs. Harkness, with maternal purring, brought him a mint julep and a palm-leaf fan. The children were down by the brook, she said, and would go crazy as soon as they caught sight of him.

Harkness had bought the wonderful old farm in March. Orchards, meadows, and wood-lot of a hundred years' cultivation, old Dutch farmhouse to make an architect's eyes shine over the remodelling of it, so much could be done without injuring its fine, streng lines. It was long, low, rooted to the soil, with a giant of a chimney whose fireplaces—in the kitchen the crane and hooks had been bricked in just as they hung—were already restored to their old uses. The roof would bear a discreet pair of dormers, and a wide veranda would in no way hurt the solid and primitive dignity of style. Then,

with the cellar cemented and the water brought up from the brook with a ram, there seemed little left in this world for a man's desire, particularly when one ranged in the foreground of these possessions the five pretty faces which belonged to Harkness—the prettiest of the five being that under the busy sun-bonnet in the berry-patch, whither Mrs. Harkness had departed after administering the julep.

The changes were now progressing, the noise of them having but just subsided for the day.

Blaisdell, having lit a cigar, nestled deeper into the hammock like a tired child and drowsily repeated his placid declaration of envy.

To his surprise, Harkness, after drawing on his pipe for a moment in silence, blurted out, "Well, I don't know—"

Blaisdell raised himself on his elbow and stared.

"Not a fly in the ointment so soon?"

"Flies have a way of getting into ointment," grumbled Harkness. "One must expect it, I suppose."

Blaisdell studied his downcast face anxiously. "The title's all right." That was his first thought, the responsibility of searching it having lain upon his own shoulders.

"Legally, yes. Practically, there seem to be two opinions, and if old Van Ander pesters me much more, he'll have me doubting whether I've any moral right to the place at all."

"Van Ander? What kick has he got? You paid him in full."

"He wants to eat his cake and have it too. He offered to buy it back the day the men began to rip things open; but, hang it! I'd signed the contract for the repair-work—even if I'd been willing otherwise to give it up. You have to draw the line at altruism *somewhere*, and he didn't even have the full sum that I'd paid him. His daughters—a sort of

Goneril and Regan pair—had already got away with about a third of it. He lives with Goneril, down the hill a bit. You can see the chimney and the window of his little attic room." He pointed with the stem of his pipe. "There, between the cedars. It wasn't visible when we first came, but he had a big cedar cut down so that he could watch us better. He has a spy-glass. It's trained on us now, unless he's sneaking around the farm, mourning over weeds in the corn and potatoes."

In the far-away black eye of the window Blaisdell fancied he detected some kind of movement, a lighter blur the size of a face, and then, like the light in the pupil of an eye, a gleam as of sun striking on glass.

"Comes here and snarls at the workmen for spoiling the house," mourned Harkness. "A dozen times a day I'll hear him tune up, always beginning the same way—'It's none of my business.' For instance: 'It's none of my business, but you never can keep warm at them fireplaces in winter. We had 'em bricked up a-purpose. I done it myself, me an' the hired man, thirty year ago, come Thanksgiving. You'll be mighty glad to come back to stoves, I can tell ye.' Or: 'It's none of my business'—this was when the furnace came—'but I wouldn't have one o' them infernal machines in my cellar for a thousand dollars. Forget to put water in 'em some day, and then where'll ye be? Powder-mill blew up, over yonder, ten year ago; killed two men. You could see the smoke twenty mile.' And if it's all I can do to keep civil, you can imagine the effect on the workmen. One of them came down from the roof the other day and stuck his chin in the old man's face. 'If it's none of your business, dry up an' go home! Your mother oughtn't to let you out.' Van Ander got white and turned tail. But the carpenter repented, being Irish, and next day, when Van Ander came slinking up, they sat on a pile of lumber, smoking sociably through the noon hour. What the old fellow said I don't know, but as the Irishman climbed up to the roof again, I heard him say, 'Looney! Maybe he's right. I don't know. Van Ander thinks I am. He spreads accounts of my insanity through the neigh-

borhood, helps himself to my fruit, prowls around the house at night—I've often looked out and seen him in moonlight or early sunrise sitting all huddled up on a pile of lumber."

"Have you threatened to arrest him for trespass?"

"Oh no; you couldn't, you know."

"Shucks! Tell him to go and buy another farm. You can't blame yourself for anything."

"I don't blame myself, exactly. Yes, why *doesn't* he buy another farm? That's what I asked him. He says he's too old to begin over again. Seems to blame me for *that*. Yet he's only fifty-five."

"But—fifty-five— I'm forty-nine myself. Fifty-five isn't old."

"And I'm forty-five. No. You'd think he could begin again."

"Fifty-five! That isn't old. You're just ready to settle down and enjoy things at fifty-five. At fifty-five you ought to have done enough drudgery so that you can sit down with a good appetite to the—well, the essential things that one can only give half an eye to while one is hurrying about on the business of daily bread. For instance, I've been planning—how would you like me for a neighbor? I just ache to scratch around in the dirt and make things grow. And we could get up golf-links and a tennis-court for the kiddies, and winters I'd put in writing law-books—"

He had wandered from the Van Ander problem, his enthusiasm having broken away coltishly into imaginary green pastures. He sat up astride of the hammock and looked about at the landscape, now taking on the vague yellow and purple bloom of late afternoon. "What's the use of staying shut up in an office when you can have all this? 'Go out and possess the land.' I thought I'd build a lodge of about four rooms with a big fireplace. I suppose I could get a native female to come in and clean up."

Harkness brightened, then grew doubtful. "It sounds good, and your head-piece is enough better than Van Ander's, so you might stand it all right, but—giving up one's occupation—for myself, I'd be afraid to stop painting."

"But you artist fellows—that's different. That's the way your brain is made in the beginning. You can't stop. But



Drawn by Harold Matthews Bret

Half-tone plate engraved by L. C. Faber

"YOU CAN NEVER KEEP WARM AT THEM FIREPLACES IN WINTER"

a profession, like law, is accident and environment."

"Maybe. It would be great luck, having you for a neighbor. But Van Ander was so chipper at the idea of quitting work. Said he was being turned out to grass. Always believed in turning old horses out to grass when they'd worked hard all their lives. His children were married, and he was lonesome all by himself. He'd board around with them. They could take care of the old man, he guessed, seeing as how he'd made 'em each a present of a house and lot when they got married. Well, he has stayed with Goneril ever since. Her attic window gives him a view of us."

"Goneril and Regan—are they so terrifically Shakespearian as all that?"

"Shakespeare knew most things—among others the singular effect which somebody else's money has on the primitive mind. The Van Ander Goneril and Regan aren't good-looking, as one imagines the Misses Lear to have been. Regan—who might not be so bad if he'd give her a chance—is fat and snubby, and has eight or ten children. Her real name is Lyddy Ann. Goneril's name is Claribel, and she's built like a hat-rack. She hasn't any children, only a cat, who comes up here now and then after a chicken. She called on Lucy when we first came, and stayed all the afternoon. Lucy nearly went crazy trying to entertain her. She kissed Lucy when she went away. Lucy said it was like being caressed by a file or a dried herring, except that it was slimy as well as dried up.

"She wears a very blue silk shirt-waist, and a picture-hat with pink roses, and white cotton gloves, and sings in the choir. Hereabouts she's considered quite stylish. And she's a good housekeeper, with all kinds of mats to wipe your feet on; and she wouldn't let poor old Van Ander take Moses, his dog, to her house, because dogs clutter 'round. You'll remember Lear's daughters wouldn't let him have followers, either. I've been reading *Lear* lately; thought I might get points from it. That's what they finally split on—the followers. Goneril thinks her cat is enough pets for the family, and doesn't see why her father needs his dog around, when the cat is willing and ready to sit in his lap at any time. He came up here

and gave me the dog and told me his troubles. That was before he went back on me. He was grateful to me then for taking the beast. Now he seems to think I won him away by craft and guile. Strange thing, a point of view! Perhaps digestion affects it a good deal. They live on coffee and ham and canned tomatoes down at Goneril's."

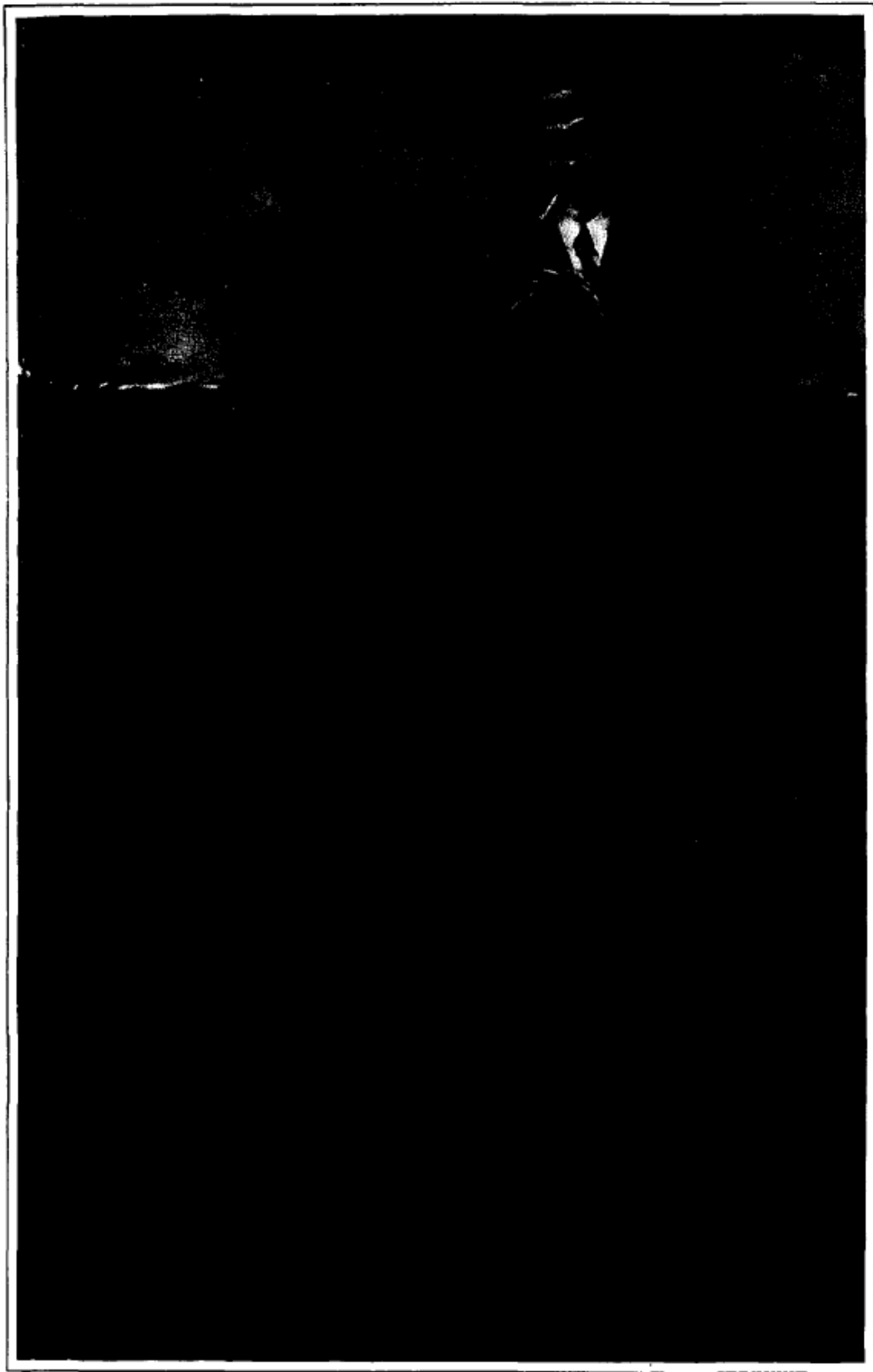
A long and elaborate peal upon a Japanese gong—this manner of announcing dinner was the familiar task of a small Harkness—called them into the house. The glow of sunset struck across the dinner-table, emphasizing the shining chafing-dish and the large glass dish of red and yellow raspberries. The children kept up an incessant chirping, while Mrs. Harkness, busy and content, extended her motherly care even to Blaisdell and to the dog Moses, who watched from the doorway.

Remembering how pale and winter-killed those ruddy faces had been before the farm was bought, Blaisdell rejoiced in the clear tan which now masked them all. Even the pink and white of the two-year-old had taken on a golden tinge. He was a quiet person, but with a tendency to put his fist in the sugar-bowl.

The air was hot and dry; plants, even weeds, were dying of the drouth, but the pressure at Blaisdell's neck was gone, and that terror of ambulances, hospitals, and the "Death List for the Day" had departed.

"We've lost our blackcaps," said Mrs. Harkness. Her face was burned more richly than the children's, particularly the capable-looking nose. "The heat has withered them on the bushes—little dried-up mummies. But the yellow raspberries do very well, and some red ones are left, and next week there'll be blackberries—monsters! There's simply no end to the fruit. Have you seen the quince-orchard? We'll have to sell some. It would be a sin to let it waste, and if I put it all up, there'd be enough for a regiment. I'm going to start a cannery—home-made jams, you know, and that sort of thing. I've read of women who made money that way, and paid off mortgages and things—"

She stopped and blushed, not having meant to mention mortgages before Blaisdell, since it was he who held the mort-



Drawn by Harold Matthews Brett

"THERE'S THE MOON," SAID HARKNESS

gage on the house, and she suspected (but Blaisdell knew) that the likelihood of its early payment was small.

After dinner Harkness suggested: "There's some mint up the road. We might have another julep before going to bed." So they started out with their pipes and Moses. By that time the stars were coming out above the pale remnant of sunset. The small insect noises sounded thirsty and faint. So long had the drouth and heat continued that there was no dew. The dusty white ribbon of road wavered up a hill so that by degrees one came to a view of the valley, where the window lights twinkled, much like the meadow of fireflies nearer at hand.

Having reached a spot where the fragrance of mint hung like an invisible cloud, they sat on a fence with their feet dangling in the leaves, waiting for moonlight to show them the plants; but Moses went over to the other side of the road, where the slim cedars stood like men in the darkness, and lay down with an odd whimper, his tail stirring up a cloud of dust as it brushed back and forth.

"You say Van Ander hasn't bothered Lucy yet?"

"No; I've managed to ward him off one way or another. I don't want her pity roused. She thinks he's a nuisance, but has missed the tragedy of it so far—and—she mustn't be worried—now."

A comprehending flicker of memory showed Blaisdell a small pink knit shoe, the needles still sticking in it, which had peeped at him out of a demure pink-ribboned work-basket. The Harkness two-year-old had outgrown the foolishness of pink knit shoes ages ago. Decidedly, then, Lucy must be guarded from worries.

For, once Blaisdell had a wife himself, and they two had lived in a suburban house with an acre of ground, where he had done great things with a garden. For a season she had been busy in that way, knitting little shoes. But they had never been worn. Instead she took the baby as soon as ever he came and went away with him into a sort of mist. If they had lived, Blaisdell would hardly have begun to think of retiring from business at forty-nine; there would have been too much to work for. Decidedly, Lucy must have no worries.

"There's the moon," said Harkness. "Looks like a fire, doesn't it? She'll be up directly. You can make out the rim now."

The great red bubble swelled up over the edge of the trees.

"You don't get tired of these things. If it weren't so dusty, the night would be perfect. 'Sh!—look there—by the fence—by gracious! Do you suppose he heard?"

In the faint shimmer of moonlight they saw that what they had taken for one of those slim graveyard cedars was a man leaning against the fence, his face turned toward the valley, while Moses curled about his feet.

"Good evening, Mr. Van Ander," called Harkness. "Fine night."

"Yes," came dully. "But we need rain."

"Have a cigar?"

"Oh,—it's you, is it?"

The figure hesitated, its head bent toward them, but it was too dark to see the eyes; then shambled away without further remark than a kind of weary grunt, Moses trotting silently after, forgetful that there had been a change of masters.

"I don't," said Harkness, "seem to find any further pleasure here."

"He couldn't be going to the house to bother Lucy?"

"He's never been inside yet. Still—let's get the mint and go back. I can smell it hereabout."

By the light of a match they made out to gather a few handfuls of the rough, fragrant leaves, and then turned back, the toads scuttling out of their way with a dry rustle and flop into the grass. On one side of them was the resigned, incessant lament of a whippoorwill, on the other the tremulous screech of an owl, and there was a furtive melancholy in the parched, sullen air of the midsummer night, which centred to their distressed imagination in the shambling figure ahead of them, whose way took him past lighted windows that used to be his own, past the perfume of an orchard where he might now enter only as a thief, though the trees were of his own planting.

They saw him on a rise of ground against the sky, plodding and sorrowful, heard his footsteps for a moment; then the wind took the leaves and with their insistent rustle obscured other sounds.

But when they reached the box hedge, there he stood with elbows on the gate, intent upon the shadowy bulk of masons' paraphernalia set out upon the disordered lawn. He pointed a finger that shook with anger.

"It's none of my business, but them fellows o' your'n got their bags of cement right onto my wife's lily-o'-the-valley bed. I don't care about flowers myself, but I supposed all proper womenfolks did;" and with this innuendo against Mrs. Harkness, whose pleasant profile at that moment passed the window, intent on some little fragment of household business, Mr. Van Ander took his dark way down the hill to his daughter's house and the hot, unsavory attic, whence the lights of his old house would be visible until he slept, and its roof the first thing he would see in the fresh gray and pink of the morning.

"We might move that cement," said Blaisdell, eying doubtfully the pile of twelve bags, each of them of the bulk and more than the weight of a man.

Harkness groaned. "No. It might as well be that as anything else. The drouth had killed the plants, anyway, and there's so little space just here to put things. They'll probably come up another year. The cement won't be there more than a week, anyway. Last week we had to take down a vine so that the men could break in for the dormer. We didn't hurt it any more than we could possibly help. It will be as good as ever in a year or two; but he came up and watched. 'It's none of my business, but I planted that creeper myself, thirty year ago, when I was first married.' I couldn't get it into his head that I wasn't hurting it."

"Why don't you send her to the shore or somewhere until this business is over? Perhaps he'll settle down when the building is done. Of course that keeps him riled."

"You couldn't budge her with dynamite. She's in love with the place, and thriving like a weed."

"I think, in your place, I'd budge somebody."

But Harkness responded with the placidity of experience, "You don't know her."

The voice of a phonograph suddenly

cut through the night, from the direction in which the old man had gone, dominating all the smaller raspings of insects like some brazen cicada:

"Way down upon the Suwanee Ribber—"

"Yes," said Harkness, dryly, "they've been getting all the latest improvements down at Goneril's since Van Ander's money went to live there. The phonograph is new. Last week it was a crayon enlargement of her photograph. She wanted me to come down and give my opinion as an artist."

"You went?"

"Yes. You get to wondering where the old boy will bring up. You are unwholesomely attracted to the scene of his sufferings the way people are attracted to the house where there has been a murder; not that there is anything about it different from other houses of that class—a little grimmer and less homelike, maybe,—not much. The portrait was about what she deserved."

"All up an' down de whole crea-tion,"

snarled the phonograph.

When it had delivered all the verses of the "Suwanee River," it took up in succession "Home, Sweet Home," "Old Black Joe," and "My Old Kentucky Home"; and having sung them all, began at the beginning and went through them again. It croaked far into the night, for Goneril was entertaining company; and it was not until after eleven that it ended with a grand bray of "Nearer, My God, to Thee."

Blaisdell, kept awake by the clamor, lit a cigar, and sat on his window-ledge in the moonlight, considering with some wonder that country people were, after all, born to trouble as the sparks fly upward, just like city people. It seemed odd that it should be so, looking at the delicate glimmer of the moonlight on the stirring leaves. Did beauty make no difference, then? And if he fled the city, as he had planned, would Black Care follow on? Would he wish, like Van Ander, to buy back his humdrum content?

"O-oh, Nellie was a La-ady,
La-a-ast night she died,"

jeered the machine.

But silence came at last, and he fell



Drawn by Harold Matthews Brett

Half-tone plate engraved by W. H. Clark

"SHE'S IN LOVE WITH THE PLACE"

asleep. Once, toward morning, Moses lifted his voice and clanked his chain. But his alarmed threats changed quickly to appealing whimpers, a regular thudding indicating that his tail, in violent agitation, was whacking his kennel. "Van Ander," thought Blaisdell, sleepily, and drowsed off while wondering whether he had curiosity enough to get up and peep at this midnight colloquy between the old man and his dog.

"The little dogs and all,

Tray, Blanch and Sweetheart, see, they bark at me,"

he quoted in his dream, and thought he was watching Lear on the stage, and that Goneril wore a blue silk shirt-waist, and objected to dogs.

Harkness's insistent hand on his shoulder woke him. At first he was indignant to see the sunrise color still in the sky, then suddenly became alert and cool, and very wide awake. Harkness was stammering and shivering.

"You've got to help me. I—I cut him down, but he was already cold, so I've locked the door—"

"What!"

"It's a way f-farmers have. I've read of such things, and I ought to have known. Th-they are always hanging themselves in barns."

Blaisdell dressed with speed.

"You're sure you locked the barn door? And Lucy?"

"She has waked up and will be getting breakfast. She'll want to go and hunt for eggs."

"I'll get the eggs," said Blaisdell, quickly, "and hitch up the horse at the same time. Keep close watch on the house while I get ready. I'll take her and the kids on a picnic for the day. You'll be free then to—see to things. The workmen will be coming—and Goneril and Regan, I suppose. To-morrow morning, by the first train, I'll take Lucy and the kids to the shore. I know of a cottage. And they needn't know—not for a long time, anyway—"

The farm looked as peaceful as ever when Blaisdell, anxious-eyed, drove up that evening with his happy carriageful of picnicers.

Harkness, pale and tired, nodded reassuringly. The barn door stood innocently open. The only thing not quite right was the strange humor of Moses, who sat chained at his kennel door, howling—long, strange, wild cries.

The next morning as Blaisdell sat in the train with the Harkness two-year-old, heavy and pliant with sleep, in his arms, and the rest of the two seats overflowing with jubilant Harknesses, he gravely considered, as he had done before, that Walter had too much artistic temperament to take care of such a handful of humanity as this without being supervised himself. Never in the world, no matter how famous he became, would he lay by enough to see them all properly through school and college and to steady them for their first bout with the world. The hermitage, therefore, must be put off for a while. What were childless old folk for, anyway? The post of uncle was an important one, and of much responsibility.

Moreover, since beholding that grim old bit of clay in the barn, he had somehow lost his eagerness to throw up his occupation. How could he know that he would take to a useless pasture life any better than old Van Ander had done, who had been so jolly a few months before about being turned out to grass? "Better wear out than rust out,"—the proverb sounded menacing. Content and idleness might not go together, after all.

That dusty office, ugly and tiresome—one might miss it badly. Who would feed the mouse that lived at the back of his lowest desk-drawer and had nibbled important papers until he had substituted worthless ones? The hoarse noise of Wall Street, the flock of pigeons making military evolutions above the tall buildings, the sinuous flight of ticker-tapes—was it for things like these that one might become very homesick, just as another had done for orchards and fields no longer his?

As the train began to be invaded by the more lifeless air of the town, he squared his shoulders and sat up straight. He was going back to harness and plough. Blessed be drudgery, that keeps a man's mind clean and sane!