

Old Fashioned Arbor Day

When Mr. Abner Locke purchased the "Gran'ther" Day place, his worthy wife, Aunt Locke, as all the neighborhood called her, had only one objection to make.

"Tain't but two houses up the hill from where we are now, so 'tain't like goin' out of the neighborhood, and there's room enough in it for us to overflow into. Laad knows that's what we need with eight children all a-crowdin' and a-growin'." The good woman commented to the friends who "jest run in" to talk the matter over. "But everybody knows what a hand I am for trees and growin' things, and Gran'ther Day couldn't abide so much as a mallein stalk anywhere near the house. The orchard's real pretty, but the main lot's as bare as the top of ole Deacon Stowe's head."

Winchester Hill climbed in a series of leaps toward the western horizon. At the top of one of these leaps, just where the hill seemed to pause a little to take breath, Gran'ther Day had built this great, square, hip-roofed mansion facing down the hill toward the river.

The house was set firmly on the solid ledge—founded on a rock, according to Scripture—the owner had been wont to assert—and the front lot, which was narrow in proportion to its depth, sloped steeply down to Miss Eliza Barnard's nest picket fence, without a tree or a shrub to relieve its bareness.

On the farther side of the house the orchard made, in summer, a hazy of greenness and shade, but the only tree which stood near the house itself was the spreading oak at the back, which, according to neighborhood tradition, had been planted by Gran'ther's young son Joseph just before he ran away, fifty years since.

This tree Gran'ther Day had left untouched, perhaps in memory of the son who had inherited too many of his father's traits for both to live comfortably in the same house.

"He did it just to plague me," Gran'ther more than once remarked placidly to his wife, "and it ain't plagued me a mite. I want to see the whole length of the Kennebec river from the bend to the bay, so as to see the Betsy Day when she first leaves in view, and that tree don't neither help nor hinder."

The days of moving were a season of great excitement and festivity to the Locke family, who transported everything possible by hand in order to prolong the joys of the exodus, but when the transition from the cottage at the foot of the hill to the great house at the top had been safely accomplished, Aunt Locke began at once to plan for the future.

"I never accept things as they are till I've made considerable of an effort to have 'em different—if they don't suit me," she remarked, with characteristic energy, to her husband.

"Nobody that knows you ever thought you did, Abby," Mr. Locke answered, with his quiet chuckle.

"Come spring," Aunt Locke presently announced to her family, "I'm goin' to have a plantin' day. Long in May you can all go over to the Big Rock woods with your father, and each one pick you out a tree to plant, and I'll make a cake, and we'll have pieces spoke, and have a time that you'll remember just as long as you live. I'll give you something to think about all winter, choosin' your trees and plannin', and findin' out why you choose 'em."

Aunt Locke believed firmly that since children were created to be everlastingly a-thinkin', it was just as well to give 'em something to think about, and the joyful possibilities of "plantin' day" became a prolific topic of conversation among the youngsters of the Locke family, as well as a subject for endless squabbles in regard to the choice of trees.

"They've got to have something to contend about," Aunt Locke said, placidly, in reply to the complaints of Amanda, her eldest daughter, "and this is no theme to be ashamed of."

The month of May came at last, although it seemed to the Locke children to tarry long on the way. While awaiting its advent they had managed to learn, partly from books and partly by "word o' mouth," a good many facts and traditions about trees. Aunt Locke smiled wisely to herself sometimes when she heard their young voices discoursing glibly in regard to the Charter Oak and the George Washington Elm, or listened to the ringing notes of Adoniram, her second son, as he sang over and over at the top of his healthy lungs an old verse which he had picked up somewhere about the "north country."

Where the oak and the ash and the rowan be
I called they'd get more out of

it than just the diggin' and plantin'—the shrewd mother thought. "Set a little yeast a-workin' and it will do great things."

The afternoon in the Big Rock woods was almost as delightful as planting day. Aunt Locke had managed—just as she had always intended—to direct the final choice of the trees to be planted, but her guidance had been bestowed so gently that each child was firmly convinced that his individual selection was all his own.

Amanda always supposed that the thought of an elm as "a kind of a feminine-looking tree" originated in her own mind, and Abner junior thought he had known from earliest infancy that a straight, upright, manly-looking tree like the maple was the only possible choice for an eldest son. It was, of course, the most natural thing in the world that the twins, Almira and Julia, should plant the twin pines on the north of the house to shield the buildings from the chill winds of winter, and that Adoniram should make choice of the white oak which was to stand in the angle between the house and barn—for had he not always been "the greatest hand in the world for sweet oak acorns?" On the little plateau at the end of the house, just before the ground began to slope toward the orchard, Samuel and Hester went to plant a beech and a horse-chestnut respectively, so that in future years they might be able to go nutting at their own door.

Little Julius the fair-haired youngest of the flock, was the only one of the number who really made an unbiased choice and triumphed in it. In the depths of the Big Rock woods he laid his tiny hand on a slender birch sapling clad in the shimmering purity of its springtime whiteness, and said to his mother:

"I'm going to have this angel tree."

"So you shall dear," Aunt Locke exclaimed, "but you want a nice, straight one! This one's got a crook in it—see!"

"That's why I want it," little Julius persisted, with just the threatening of a quiver at the corners of his mouth. "It's kneelin' down to pray. Angel trees is the only ones that ever kneels down—an' they have their white robes on all the time."

When planting day came at last, bright and clear, as befitted such an unusual occasion, when the election-cake and the other dainties were all set out on the "fore-room" table, when the holes were dug, and the trees themselves lay side by side on the tender green of the Maytime grass, little Julius' "angel tree," with its bent knee, lay beside the "laylock" shoots which his father and mother were to plant at the foot of the front terrace.

Grandmother Lord, Aunt Locke's old mother, had already arrived, bringing her offering.

"There's a dozen and a half of my little frosted pound-cakes, Abby," she said. "I set out to allow for only a dozen, and then I says to myself, 'I'll slip in half a dozen more for happenin's.'"

"Of course we want grandma to come," the children had pleaded "and crazy Miss Liza'll be here anyway, but don't ask anybody else. This is our plantin' day, and there's enough of us. We don't want other folk."

"Crazy Miss Liza," as the children called her, having seen the festive preparations from her white cottage at the foot of the slope, promptly put in an appearance.

"I got a notion somehow that there were to be literary exercises," she announced, in her clear-cut tones, "and I could not deny myself the privilege. I hope I do not intrude."

There was a tradition in Riverton that overstudy had been the cause of Miss Eliza's eccentricities. "She ain't crazy; she's just a little out," people were accustomed to say. Anything resembling literary exercises invariably attracted Miss Eliza.

When all was in readiness, Mr. Locke opened the ceremonies with a little speech. "Father's a great reader," Aunt Locke often said proudly of her husband, and much poring over the English classics had made the good man's language less colloquial than that of his family. The "pieces" which the children were to recite on this occasion were mostly of his choosing.

"Plantin' trees, children," he began, "and ladies,"—remembering Grandmother Lord and Miss Eliza. "Is a good deal like the rest of life. You are in hopes to see these trees grow, and by and by, perhaps, to sit under the shade of 'em, but the chances are that if they do live and flourish, you are plantin' for another generation as well as for yourselves."

It's the same with the other acts you commit—you don't know what root they are going to take in other lives. Every time you look at these trees when they are growing with your growth, as I hope they are going to do, I want you to remember what I've said today, and think whether you are growing straight and true, and putting forth leaves and fruit as you'd ought to."

"Julius' tree ain't straight, anyway," the twins were whispering to each other, when they were interrupted by Grandmother Lord.

"Goodness me," the old lady exclaimed, "if there ain't Parson Gow!"

The Locke children looked at each other in dismay while their parents greeted the newcomer cordially, and explained to him the importance of the occasion.

"Hum-m!" they presently heard—Parson Gow's well-known prefix to his speech. "If you feel assured that my presence will not be an intrusion or—hum-m!—embarrassment to the young people, I shall esteem it a privilege indeed to remain. I was tempted out by the beauty of the day, and little deemed that I should stumble—as I may express it—upon so felicitous an occasion," and then, with another resounding "hum-m!" Parson Gow offered his snuff-box to Mr. Locke.

"Embarrassment to the young people," indeed! The naughty twins made faces at each other behind the backs of their elders. A clergyman in those days was an awe-inspiring personage, and although Parson Gow was a small man physically, his keen eyes and the splendor of his lace ruffles, combined with the fathomless learning which they supposed him to possess, made him almost a supernatural being in the children's eyes.

The young Lockes grew a little calmer, however, when they saw their parents proceeding to plant the lilac shoots in a row on the terrace, and heard their mother exclaim in her usual matter-of-fact tones, as tranquilly as if no dignified parson were present:

"It beats all that Gran'ther Day couldn't 'a' had sense enough to 'a' done this years ago. 'Twouldn't obscured his vision any. He would 'a' looked right over 'em."

Amanda had planted her elm-tree firmly just beyond the south corner of the house, and was reciting, with many blushes and tremors, the selection from Andrew Marvell's "Thoughts in a Garden," which her father had chosen for her, when the stately form of old Governor Morton loomed into view.

He was coming with his wife—whom all the village called Lady Morton on account of her trailing skirts and her gracious politeness—to pay their annual neighborhood visit. The governor himself was a man of imposing presence, whose piercing black eyes under shaggy brows seemed "to look right through ye," as the twins afterward complained, when rehearsing the terrors of the ordeal through which they had passed. He had once held the office of chief executive of the state, and had retained the title ever since.

When these new visitors had been welcomed and invited to remain, Aunt Locke's mind was divided between pride in the lofty character of her guests, and anxiety lest their unexpected presence should "scare them young folks into fits."

Amanda's frightened spirit, having followed that of her poet,

"My soul into the boughs does glide, refused to emerge from this seclusion, so Abner was forced to come forward with a desperate attempt at the courage which befits one of the sterner sex.

His maple-tree was set at the south end of the house on a line with Amanda's elm, and when that task was ended, he declaimed with the aplomb of one who had gained a reputation for his skill in "speaking pieces," the lines beginning:

"It is not growing like a tree
In bulk, doth make man better be."

"Yes, yes," Parson Gow commented approvingly, when Abner had finished, "hum-m!—Ben Jonson. Well selected, Brother Locke, well selected! The young man has a natural gift of oratory—hum-m!"

"The spirit of it's true, too!" Aunt Locke declared, looking from the big ex-governor to the little parson. "Tain't whether you're big or little that counts. It's what you are in yourself."

The twins, who had by this time recovered some of their natural heedlessness, next planted their pine-trees, and afterward recited in concert a brief portion of "Paradise Lost." Standing hand in hand and swaying rhythmically as they spoke, they singsonged the words with much enjoyment, especially when they came to:

Wave every tops, ye pines,
With every plant, in sign of worship wave!

Adoniram, who claimed that he "want no speaker," offered a performance on the flute as his share. Besides being a "nateral musician," Adoniram was a youth of quick wits and for the dancing tune which he had intended to play had the company retained its secular character, he substituted a mournful psalm-tune "without anybody's sayin' a word to him," as his mother afterward boasted.

Samuel followed the planting of his beech-tree with a few verses of the first chapter of Genesis. We began slowly:

"And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yieldin' seed, and the fruit tree yieldin' fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself."

Samuel was a timid child, and had been waiting in trembling for his turn, with the fear of "the minister" before his eyes, so it is not to be wondered at, perhaps, that having progressed thus far in safety, he suddenly became confused, and concluded unexpectedly with:

"And the parson saw that it was good!" Parson Gow himself could not refrain from smiling, and the old governor's heavy bass laugh completed Samuel's discomfiture, so that he fled in deep affliction to the back of the house, and could only be persuaded to peer around the corner while Hester recited in shrill accents her favorite:

Why, Phoebe, have you come so soon?

after planting her horse-chestnut tree. It mattered little to Hester that her selection had nothing to do with the tree-planting.

"It's verses!" she declared. "Why ain't that enough?"

Little Julius, who had been stringing rimes together ever since he could talk, had declined all suggestions from his elders.

"I'm goin' to make my own piece," he had persistently announced.

When his father, with the child's proud attempt at assistance, had established the kneeling "angel tree" firmly in its place, the little fellow laid his hand upon the slender trunk and knelt in his turn, raising his blue eyes reverently toward the blue of the skies. His fair hair made a halo round his sweet, childish face with its look of unquestioning trust.

Little Julius Locke I be,
Come to plant a angel tree,
Blessed Jesus, look an' see!

he piped in his clear, childish voice. Then he crept, bashfully to where the old governor was sitting, and gave a sigh of joy when he found himself lifted into the strong arms of that imposing person.

"You're such a great man," he whispered to his new friend, "I like you." Little Julius, with childish discernment, had caught the kindly gleam of the dark eyes under the shaggy brows.

When Parson Gow was invited to close the exercises with reading and prayer, with the ready tact which often distinguished him, he made his share in the exercises very brief. Yet long after, when the timid little Samuel had become an old man, I heard him tell how often when far away from home—for Samuel grew up to follow the sea—he had thought of that childhood day, and seen in his mind's eye good Parson Gow, standing on the green hillcrest beside the Gran'ther Day house, his glance following the silver windings of the Kennebec, and repeating, as one who saw a heavenly vision:

"And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God, and of the Lamb."

"In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."

"That prayer the old parson made that day," said Captain Samuel, reverently, "beseechin' Almighty God to help us children keep our souls as pure as the clear crystal of the river, and remindin' us that we could each one plant the tree of life, the tree of God's love, in our innermost bein'—that follered me into a good many ports where I should 'a' been a worse man without it."

When Parson Gow had finished, Aunt Locke invited the other members of the company to come in and "sit to table comfortable" while they enjoyed the viands which had been provided, and soothed themselves with a cup of tea, but the young Lockes wandered whither they would, blissfully nibbling election cake and discussing the mingled joys and terrors of the day.

Just as the distinguished guests were about to depart, with many polite protestations of gratitude for their entertainment, a bronzed, hearty-looking young fellow, who had been climbing the hill with rapid

step, appeared before the little group hearing in his hand a long shoot from some thrifty vine.

The children, with joyous shouts, recognized "Captain Joe," the skipper of the Abner J. Locke, a coasting schooner in which their father owned a half-interest.

"I hurried the Abner Locke all I could," the young man announced, seriously, yet with a lurking twinkle in his eyes, "but the wind wa'n't right for regular quickstep time. I've brought you a matrimony vine, Aunt Locke, and I want 'Mandy to help me plant it."

He stepped forward as he spoke and took the blushing Amanda by the hand.

The stately little parson looked from one to the other of the young faces so full of hope and youth. There was a certain wistfulness in

his glance. His own young wife, much loved and mourned, had died long years ago.

"Hum-m! hum-m!" he began, at last breaking the embarrassed silence. "I think, dear friends, that this closing act will furnish a memorable ending to a memorable day, and 'when—hum-m!—the fitting season shall have arrived, I stand ready to pronounce a blessing upon the planting of a new household and home."—Youth's Companion.

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