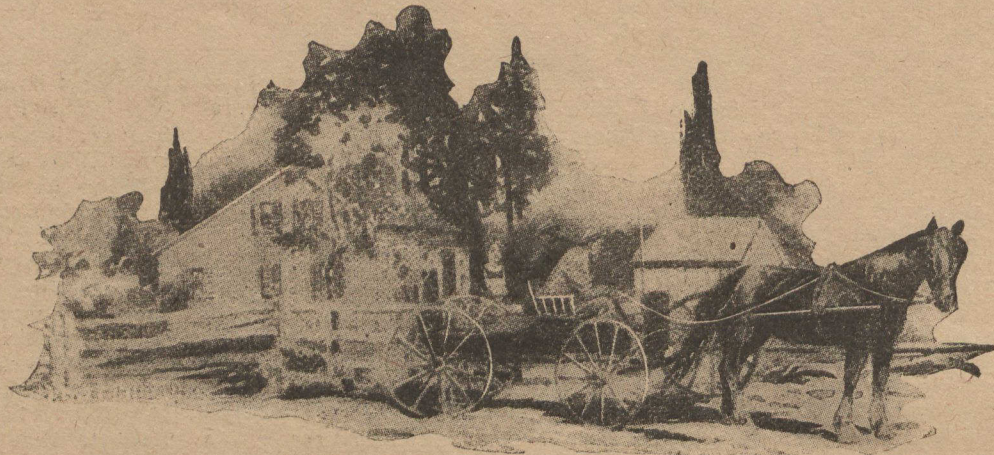


THEODOSIA'S SUN-DOG

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ILLUSTRATIONS
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"Theodosia Came to the Fence to Meet Us."

EVERY Tuesday morning for thirty-two years Oliver M. McVeagh had brought a big white envelope to our little country post office, had sealed and stamped it with emphatic slaps, had poked it through the mailing slit with an emphatic poke, and had turned to those who happened there with an emphatic smile that would have puzzled a stranger, but that never failed to reassure us for whom it was intended.

For we were known to the world only through Oliver M. McVeagh. Without him we would have been what we were in the long ago—when our children were as our grand-children are now and Oliver had not yet "contributed to the press"—an unsung rural neighbourhood of six square miles, plodding our uneventful way from planting to garnering and from garnering around to planting again.

When the world contemplates a community through a single glass, it is well (for the community) that the glass be an excellent one. Oliver was our glass. Never had he focused us wrong. Never had he permitted the hand political, the hand religious, or the hand scandalous to turn him till we were blurred. The world saw us as we were, and since we were properly proud of ourselves, it pleased us to be seen just that way.

I wonder, now, that we withheld so long from him his merited meed of hard-won appreciation. I wonder that we used to jog our horses up a bit when we drove downward past his farm, hoping to escape his column of "Eden" items in the forthcoming Daleville Sun; that we tried to conceal our betrothals from him, the minutiae of our weddings and funerals, the proud bashfulness of our births, and the destination of our long-planned trips.

I wonder, I say, that we ever tried to conceal such things from him, seeing that he always found them out anyway and that somehow or other they never looked so ill in print as we thought they would. Indeed, we got to liking them there, and all because we had learned, at last, to trust ourselves to Oliver M. McVeagh.

Every Tuesday morning in thirty-two years, I have said, found him at the post office with his Eden budget. Perhaps that is putting it too strong, and we are chary of exaggeration in Eden. He did lose out once, when his brother, in a distant state, was dying. I was at his house when the message came and he asked me to wait till he could get ready, so I sat there in his barren, bachelor's parlour while he packed his old-fashioned slick valise and donned his sabbaticals.

"I must stop a minute at Theodosia Parkman's," he said, as we climbed into the buck-board his hired man had brought around.

HE was accustomed to refer to Miss Parkman as "my literary competitor." When I told her about it once she got hopping mad.

"Competitor, indeed!" she sniffed. "Ol McVeagh my competitor! Why, he never wrote a line in his life that was good enough to publish outside the Daleville Sun!" I wish there were some way of indicating in print a modicum of the contempt with which she garnished the Daleville Sun.

I must confess there were people in Eden who put Theodosia in a class clear above Oliver's. She wrote poetry, exclusively, she claimed with fine pride, and it found semi-occasional lodgment in that type of publication which abjures swear words and the names of intoxicating drinks. We know a thing or two in Eden! We know, for instance, that real poetry is as far above ordinary reporting as heaven is above earth. But what we never did settle to everybody's satisfaction was whether the sort of poetry Theo-

dosia wrote was above the sort of reporting Oliver did.

Theodosia was in her garden when we drove up and she came to the fence to meet us. She was a tall, lean woman with superb black eyes and a rather severe face. I can remember when she was called the prettiest girl in Dubois County. Oliver cramped the buckboard to bring it closer and then turned in his seat, draping his long legs over the end.

"Theodosia," he said, "I've got a mighty sick brother back East and I'm hurrying to see him before it's too late. I thought I'd stop and ask if you'd mind gathering a little bunch of news for the Sun? Needn't go to any trouble, you know. Just take whatever comes your way."

SHE was quick in her expression of sympathy for him; she never failed anyone as to that. Indeed, there were folk right in Eden who were cynical enough to declare she would have written better poetry had she been less sympathetic. Even Oliver, who rarely criticised her, once told me he wished to heaven Theodosia would quit drying her eyes long enough to look at her feet—meaning, of course, her poetical ones.

In the first half minute she spent condoling him, I thought I detected a lurking hesitancy to grant the favour he asked. She gave me the impression of sparring for time. Still, I knew there had never been anything evasive about Theodosia Parkman. When she fought, she fought in the open, and when she poked fun at anything she poked it the same way. But she was just as proud as the rest of us, and she must have recalled how often she had ridiculed Oliver's reportorial task. If there was any hesitancy, however, it soon passed.

"I'll do the best I can," she said, "only I must do it in my own way, Oliver."

"That's just what I want you to do, Theodosia," he declared, how heartily I did not at the instant appreciate. "Give yourself full swing. I may have to be gone two weeks. Be sure to send the items in Tuesday morning. You'll have two days to get the first batch off, and I'll give you for a starter what I've got together since the last issue."

He tore a few leaves from his notebook and reached them across the fence to her. "I guess you can make them out," he said. "I'd have had them in better shape if I'd known somebody else was going to use them."

"I'm sure I'll have no trouble at all with them," said she, with a critical glance at the untidy scrawl.

After we had left her, with profound thanks on Oliver's part, I remarked that it took a good deal of courage to ask Theodosia to do a thing she had always given us to understand was quite beneath her talent. Oliver regarded me with a quizzical grin.

"She's been itching for years to show me how to do these Eden items," he said. "Now she's got the chance, we'll see what she makes of it."

He had arranged with me to drive his rig home after his departure from the station, and I was about to pass Theodosia's lane an hour later when she arose from the porch, where she had evidently been awaiting my return, and beckoned me.

"If you're not in a hurry, let the horse stand and come in," she called, and I went up and took a seat on the porch beside her. She had the notebook leaves which Oliver had given her, and her black eyes were dancing.

"I want you to read these items over with me," she chuckled, and we read down the first page:

Ten pound boy at Joe Faber's. Mother and son doing well. Congratulations, Joe.

Davy Hillet is building a five-room cottage with all the conveniences, on his forty opposite Rodney's schoolhouse. Rumour saith he's trebled his visits to a certain farmhouse on Wheatly Ridge. Tired of baching, eh, Davy?

Sol Rogers has a bran-new driven well in his dairy yard now. Sol says people were beginning to object to the taste of the old well in his milk.

And so on, down to the bottom of the page. A simple, bucolic narration of the little things that make up life in Eden, told in the vernacular of our community. We had seen it every week for years and we had accustomed ourselves to whatever was wrong or inane or crude about it. At all events, we argued, it lacked the one thing we detested above everything else in Eden—affectation. And that was something!

But I had never realised what a terrible affliction we had endured in Oliver M. McVeagh till that morning on Theodosia's porch. I had not known that country correspondents, if they were like Oliver, had so much to answer for. It was really quite dreadful from Theodosia's point of view. Till then, too, I had never appreciated how silly we had all been to concoct romances—as we had been doing for years—between Oliver and Theodosia, based on their "literary affinity." Indeed, by the time Theodosia had finished her comment on Oliver's items I had quite concluded that "literary" and "affinity" were words clear beyond Cupid's power of hyphenation.

"For twenty years Ol McVeagh has been making Eden ridiculous by this sort of thing," cried she, shaking the poor, mussed leaves challengingly beneath my nose. "Oh, I know how he pooh-poos what it pleases him to call 'cloud-writing.' He's eternally harping on simple facts. But because a thing's simple is no reason it should be left naked! The trouble is that he hasn't any imagination, nor any vocabulary. He's lamentably short on verbal raiment, consequently his poor facts are forced to go strutting around in tights! I think I can promise that you'll see a change in the Eden items for the next two weeks. You may not get so much news, but you'll get what's vastly more important, a certain literary flavour, a delicacy and an imaginative element that will appeal to anyone with an imagination! And I'll see to it that my facts have verbal skirts that will decently cover their knees."

NATURALLY there was no lack of curiosity when we got our next week's Sun. We expected a certain tang of precocity, knowing Theodosia as we did, but we were scarcely prepared for what appeared under our familiar caption:

EDEN.

In the "wee sma' hours" of last Wednesday night there came, straight from elfin-land, a man-child—

"... little goddikin,

No bigger than a skittlepin."

who took up his abode in the hospitable home of Mr. Joseph Langdon Faber and Mrs. Eugenia Dale Faber, where he was rapturously received.

O thou, Sweet Child! To be beguiled

By thy infantile mirth,

Is joy supreme to those, I ween,

Who gave thee mortal birth.

Up in the old clover-field opposite Rodney's schoolhouse, where the bees hum and the birds sing and the bloom nods and the sun dapples the meadows, there is heard, these bright summer days, the sound of a solitary hammer.

For Davy Hillet is building a house up there. Handsome Davy Hillet, whom everybody in Eden knows and