



By Clayton Duff

Do you remember the Old Lot and how big we used to think it was, and the look we gave Dad when he said it was only an eighth of an acre?

Standing on the bars we could see over a wide farm across the road. Down in the field was a great stone to which we sometimes went for a walk on Sunday evenings just to look at; and there was a railway bridge in the distance clasped in maple trees and a track that the trains came ramping down. The Old Lot went hand-in-hand with the village gardens, and behind it was another field that seemed more mysterious and lonely, and ran away out of sight to a rough little swale threaded by cattle tracks where we went for the cows at nights, or to fetch home ferns for mother's garden. Not so far off, but still with a touch of the remote and foreign was a hawthorn tree, and when we stole away to get the red haws that decked its thorny branches, all the houses watched us from their back doors and windows. Beyond the field was another field, and beyond that was a distant road, and beyond the road was the corner of a pond that sometimes looked as blue as the blueing water mother used on washday.

Perhaps our new domain was cherished all the more because the title was disputed. Mrs. Meyers claimed she needed the Old Lot as much as anyone, although she had a finer house than ours, with red glass in the front door, and her husband wore a white waistcoat on Sundays. Do you remember how terrible but interesting it was the night Hugh and Joel Henry nearly had a fight beside the cherry tree (because Joel Henry belonged to Mrs. Meyers), only we and Dad went out and stopped them, and how darkly from her back stoop Mrs. Meyers overlooked the field? But afterwards she was sick and died, and we would have let her have the Old Lot then, I think, for pity's sake. It was the first we knew of death.

At least, of human death. But one day a man had come with a gun and called Old Ken down the sunny road with him, and we thought of no guile until he returned alone. For many years there was a little mound on the road-

side, just a faint ripple among the stumps and stones, that we called Ken's grave, and used to go there often on summer evenings to keep his memory green. And after the grave had lost its identity under the softening touch of Nature and the recollection of our blind old friend had become obscured by the charms of a merry and captivating successor, a more lasting souvenir remained. Hugh was not at home the day they killed Ken, and when we broke the news to him he turned his back accusingly on the world and carved the date, "June 3," as a memorial and a reproach on the side of the Old House.

Do you remember the Old House, and the first time we climbed into its sunny doorway—for there were no steps—and

pairs, we wondered how Muffie and Stelia could go on playing croquet as if there were no troubles in the world. We had one exquisite glimpse of Arcadia when Hugh brought home a sheep to pasture on our dandelions and clover, and eat from our hands and let us be its gentle shepherds. But Hugh had bought the sheep without asking leave. When he had to sell it again, in his bitterness, he let the money blow away. We thought that was a fine rebuke to the gods.

I wonder if ghosts ever fitted round the Old House after we had gone home to bed? One day Hugh heard a noise upstairs—but when he looked it was only the black-and-white heifer who had climbed up the steps and didn't know how to get down again. In one room there was a patch on the wall that showed where the cupboard used to stand when real folk lived there, and sometimes in our careless play, made us suddenly aware that we might not be without our cloud of witnesses. But as for Mrs. Prellis and Ann Guest, they were beings of a childish mythology, much too social and worldly in their habits to be true ghosts. They came to visit us in broad daylight, and even had us back to tea and things at their place. What do you think Mrs. Prellis looked like? It seems to me she was a long, narrow woman, in a dark coat and a bonnet. Mother wore bonnets then. Ann Guest never had the dominant personality Mrs. Prellis had.

The poplar trees by the fence must have had a little gate between them when the Old House was young they were so opposite the front door—and perhaps there had been a little path to the gate with daisies and cowslips growing

gether, don't you remember, without counting the old stump that was second base the nights Wat and Ann came over to play ball. The cherries must have been very small and sour, judged by more Epicurean standards than ours, but how luscious they looked glowing among the green leaves. No matter how closely we tried to watch them, some happy day they would surprise us by being ripe all of a sudden, and then how hard it was to decide whether to gorge from the loaded bough or with glutton fortitude wait to fill our pockets and our hats before the feast began.

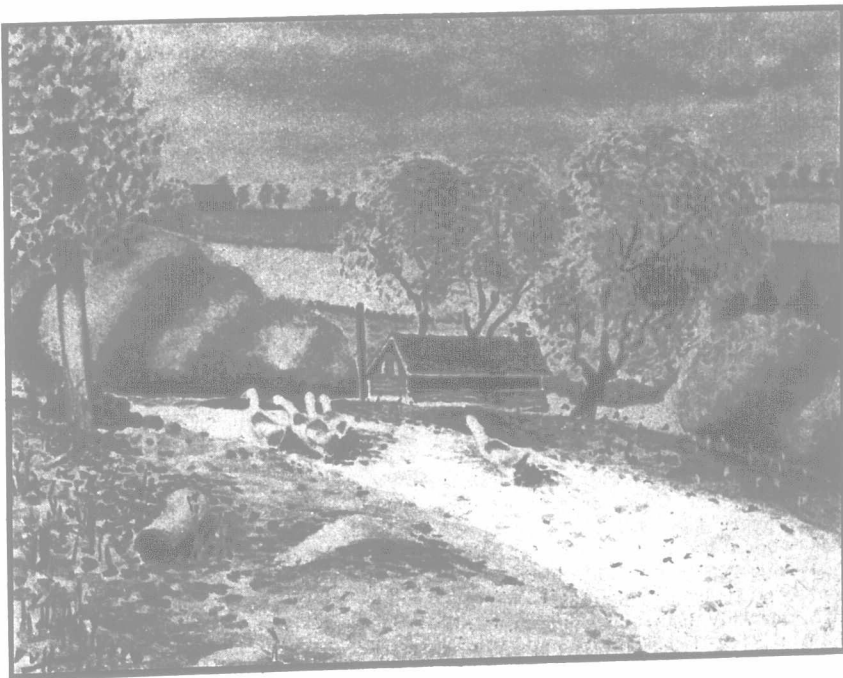
But the apple trees, I believe, were our dearest friends. One would think they had been more used to children than the cherry trees; their bark was smoother, and gentler slopes and more kindly footholds were found among their branches. The Duchess of Oldenburg, was, perhaps, a shade austere—but how proud we were to have a tree with such a stately name! How large and luscious her apples were, with their broad green and pinky streaks! There was a smooth, round stone beneath on which we used to pound them when they were tardy in ripening in order to get a counterfeit mellowness. Do you remember "the wet, sweet cheek of April," that evening long ago when we wandered into the Old Lot among the raindrops and heard a robin singing in the Duchess tree?

Do you remember—but how could you forget?—the harvest-apple trees that came next, those darlings of the year, the first to break the desert waste that had intervened since we saw the bottom of the apple barrel. The harvest trees had their lean years, and the one next the fence was not so fruitful as her companion—but oh, the apples when they did come! It was worth waiting a whole twelve-month just to smell them. We rather favored worms; worms seemed to hasten the ripening process. Sometimes, "to gild refined gold," there was a water-core.

Right in the corner above the old cans stood the snow-apple tree. It had a sister tree in the other lot, but this was our favorite, and I'm afraid we rather grudged the few boughs that overflowed into the neighbor's garden. How generous was the old tree to our sticks and stones those autumn schooldays!—snow-apples and blue skies, and big, white clouds, like feather beds! The snow-apple barrel lasted till after Christmas, and on Sunday afternoons you had a mysterious way of withdrawing to the cellar alone, emerging in due season with a cargo of apples that were intended to startle us by their perfection into rapture and applause. You always implanted them with an air of patronage on the green table-cloth, and they melted away with the calm, still hours, and the chapters of our story-books.

The crab-apple blossoms were the loveliest of spring—and oh, can't you still taste the taste of those crab-apples! They were not the great, red, insipid things that Wat and Ann boasted, but little pink-and-green fellows, crisp and acid, that made our lips curl in exquisite anticipation. One time Hugh filled a basket with straw and put a layer of crab-apples on top and took it to Mrs. Meyers. I don't see how he could keep from laughing. You and I couldn't.

The crab-apple was the most motherly



"We cherished a secret passion for a goose that was never to be satisfied."

gazed with pleasant awe into the bare, echoing rooms with the smell of lime and other days in them? How fascinated we were with those beautiful white hens with the pencilled lines on their necks picking among the fallen plaster and broken door-knobs.

The white hens were only an entrancing vision; somehow they vanished never to return. But in after years we had hens of our own—brown hens and gray hens, whose nests gave us raptures when we found them in the hay. There were pigeons, too, that billed and cooed on the long, low roof, and the new pup slept with a haughty cow in one of the chambers within. Then, when John, James and Aunt Alice drove over on Sundays in the double buggy, with its exalted seats, and the delicious dignity of the whip, the vast farm horses loomed all day in the dusk of the stables, and we marvelled at their strange contours and listened half-envious to the pleasant rhythm of their jaws among the rustling fodder.

But our hearts were more spacious than the Old House, I guess, for they were never filled. It always gave us a sense of bereavement when the wobbly little calf was sold and we cherished a secret passion for a goose that was never to be satisfied. Once when an inscrutable decree forbade us to buy, borrow, or have in possession the species of fowl known as "banties," either singly or in

quaintly at each side. But we had the ground trampled hard and smooth with our playful feet, and one of the poplars helped to support the scantling from which our swing was hung. How loose our hearts felt when we went swift and high!—and oh, do you remember the time we were standing up in the swing twisting the ropes round and round, when your hair caught! The more I tried to untwist them the more it hurt you and the harder you pounded me. At last I had to leave you hanging like Absalom while I flew for help, and they ran with the scissors and cut your thick brown hair nearly all off.

We called you "Pete" after that, I think. When I am reading about Maggie Tulliver, it is you I see with your dark hair blowing round your face and your gingham dress, and your stockings always coming down. But I wish you had worshipped me the way Maggie worshipped Tom.

Do you remember the little wrinkled cherry tree that grew near the big picket-hole, and the old gray stone that grew near the tree? And once we found a bird's-nest in the cherry tree, low down and friendly—a little brown fairy cap. And oh, do you remember the duck egg we found lying there on the ground one rainy day—so blue and wonderful as if a little piece of Heaven had dropped at our feet!

There were eight cherry trees alto-



"With your dark hair blowing round your face and your stockings always coming down."



"I wish you had worshipped me the way Maggie worshipped Tom."