

The Diary of a Country Woman

By Corra Harris

ILLUSTRATION BY CHARLES E. CLARK

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I CAME home last night after a three weeks' visit with friends in Atlanta, feeling tired and distended, which is a sluggish, uncomfortable sensation. My feet hurt me from walking on the hard pavements—not that I had the chance to take much exercise, on account of riding in Sarah's closed car every time we went downtown. The back part of this car was fitted up like a drawing-room, cushioned and upholstered in fine gray velvet, silk shades at the windows, a cut-glass vase filled with flowers fastened on one side, little mirrors everywhere, a fancy pocket let into the back of the front seat for Sarah's gold vanity case and perfume bottle—everything but hot and cold water and lavatory conveniences.

Still, my breath is shorter than it was, from holding it so often when we would be going through a jam of traffic according to the signals of a policeman who was waving his arms in the air like a man threshing peas. We were always in danger of being arrested, because Sarah has a spirited chauffeur who showed his skill by taking chances. Once we actually were sent to the curb by an exceedingly red-faced traffic officer. And I had visions of myself sitting on a hard bench in the police station until somebody came and paid us out. But we managed to squeeze through with a "copy of charges." Sarah's husband paid them the next morning—Sarah is a rich woman and shows it when she is out in this car by a reared-back, prideful air. But never have I seen such a Christian change in a woman's manner as she showed talking to that policeman. When he came over to reprimand the driver for disobeying some regulation, Sarah opened the door, stuck out one dainty foot, merely as you would show the timidity of your very last extremity to the law. She bent her supple body to him almost wailingly. She set her eyes appealingly upon him like soft blue jewels. She reached one neatly gloved hand out and laid it beseechingly upon his strong arm. But that policeman was strangely impervious to her blandishments. Maybe he had had irritating traffic experiences enough with her kind to harden his heart. Anyhow, he glared at her, talked to her like a schoolmaster who had a great mind to keep her in after school, and almost told her in plain words to shut up or what he'd do would be a plenty.

I WAS so frightened that I dared not move a finger, or uncross my hands, or turn my head. I heard what was going on between them merely because I had an ear on that side. And I saw that red and steaming policeman only out of the corner of my eye. But Sarah seemed gratified. The only effect on her was that she unsnapped her vanity case and powdered her nose when we were at last allowed to proceed. She said being conciliatory would lighten the charges. At that, they were twenty-five dollars. I can't think what the costs might have been if she had given him as good as he sent.

Living in the city hardens your heart and makes one indifferent to the lives of others. You must be, meeting a hundred people in the length of three blocks if you go out for a walk, every one of whom might shove you into the street or run over you if it were not for the law, or maybe pick your pocket, or snatch your purse, or, what is very hard for me to endure, never see you at all, or know you or

care whether you are rich or poor, living or dead. If I had lived in that big town for the last ten years I know exactly the kind of person I should have been by this time. I would have been a very large old lady, sitting in a chair, afflicted with rheumatism and dead to my own kind. I should have lost even my curiosity about other people, which is a cold way to feel about your neighbors. I noticed that nobody pays any attention even to a destructive fire if it is in the next block. They do not care whose house burns. Let the fire department attend to it. They do not even try to find out if the man saved his furniture or if he had his house insured. It is none of their business. The first week of my visit I had to learn to restrain my interest and excitement when the fire engines went roaring and clanging past Sarah's house. You are not supposed to get worried or stirred up because somebody's house is burning up in the next block. You go on with the conversation as if nobody was in trouble down the street.

IT LOOKS more like sitting in a terrible game without speaking to your hundred thousand partners than actually living with your fellow men. This is why I never could understand why people move away from the living land, with everything in nature alive or about to live, and settle in a city, where the chief objects of existence are to enrich yourself, amuse yourself and defend yourself against the encroaching lives of other people. One does not achieve that peaceful, blooming balance of mind that comes from sharing the life of the trees and fields and every other living thing. It is frightful, being surrounded and engulfed with so much merely human life. One is always in a hurry, afraid of being run over, or robbed, or

I had Thanksgiving dinner with Sarah's family and a few of their fashionable friends. It was a very fine dinner, served in courses. Everything was splendid—the china, the silver, the linen and the decorations, which were cut flowers from the florist. But there was nothing to distinguish it from any other fashionable dinner, not one thing to indicate that it was to celebrate the Lord's blessings to this nation in bountiful harvests. Likewise, the conversation was bright, far-reaching, and showed that we were intelligent people with globe-trotting minds who could grasp and discuss European politics. But there was nothing reminiscent of our own country or of the meaning of this day in our national history. I reckon one reason was because these guests knew nothing of the fields and gardens and pastures from which these bounties came. Sarah had bought everything from her grocer, her dairyman and her florist.

I felt like a heavy piece of old human furniture seated at this table among these smart people, whose minds flashed wittily and who seemed, nevertheless, to miss the point of living on such an occasion as this. I tried to look pleased and interested, but I missed the "blessing" I have always asked at my own table. And my thoughts kept flying back to the Thanksgiving dinners I remembered in my own house—not elegant affairs like this one, but made to look, taste and even smell like fruitful, fragrant history of the harvest of the years.

I REMEMBERED the last one I gave when Faith was with me. We used our oldest dishes, even if they were cracked and chipped, and had pieces of silver that had come down in the family and had been worn old and thin. We served the turkey on the great blue platter with chestnut dressing banked around him, and himself stuffed with it. We had a necklace of red, clarified apples on the very edge; a funny old china gravy boat on one side and a great bowl of rice on the other side. We had an old yellow earthen bowl filled with a grated sweet-potato pudding, a dish of green peas, a salad of winter lettuce and radishes and beets, pies, pickles, preserves, a baked ham at the other end of the table, pound cake, boiled custard and ambrosia, made of oranges and coconut piled high in a very fine cut-glass bowl. We served everything at once. This table was an altar laden with good things in thankfulness to the Lord for his blessings. And it required the last extra leaf in order to extend it far enough to bear the beauty and burden of these blessings. The decorations, I remember, were red and golden autumn leaves from the woods, nuts, two or three slender ears of yellow corn, brightly-colored candies made at home—a grand and opulent centerpiece that meant something.

AND we stuck to the text. As we ate we talked about how good everything tasted. We reminded each other of how

our grandmothers parboiled their turkeys and whipped up their sillabub with straws. We recalled stories of those times and told them, accompanied by whoops of laughter, or we got a dash of tears in our eyes and were silent for a moment in memory of some past day or of some beloved figure who used to sit at this table.

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So We Ate and Laughed Our Way Like Gallant Trenchermen Through That Real Thanksgiving Dinner

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I remember how Faith, very graceful and pretty in her brightly flowered silk frock, bent and swayed with merriment over the tale that I told of fattening the Thanksgiving goose when I was a child.

Mother had bad luck with her turkeys that year, and there was no money in those hard times—just after the Civil War—to spend for a turkey. But she was never the one to be cheated out of a celebration for lack of funds. She was a great hand to keep birthdays with the shining mark of a cake, and every day that had a right or a reason for being remembered!

So she had Silas put in a coop to be fattened for Thanksgiving. Silas was a sort of bachelor gander who never mated in the spring. A sad, gentle old bird, as I remember him, that always plucked his grass at a lonely distance from the other geese.

Now, it is known to be a fact that no goose ever eats enough to fatten. He must be stuffed with raw dough as long as he can be made to swallow it.

THIS was my task. Three times daily I must go out with a pan of succulent dough and herbs, persuade Silas to stick his head through a crack in the coop, seize it, open his long, pink bill and poke the dough in as into a living bottle.

When the day came for sacrificing him, father was for having a goose pulling, but mother would not hear of such a barbarous amusement. No goose of hers should be hung up and his head jerked at so much a jerk! I do not know how she reconciled her kind heart to the way she had forcibly fed this poor bird!

But I recall that dinner distinctly, when Silas graced the turkey platter like a long, flat-breasted boat of himself, very brown, sending forth a delicious fragrance. Father stuck the fork in with a jab and began the carving with a graceful flourish of the knife. Alas! He could not be carved. Not even the strength of a man could dismember that heroic bird! If you ask me what happened then, I do not remember, save only the deepening flush upon mother's face, the wild glare of horror in father's brilliant blue eyes, the polite silence of their guests on either side of the table and my gluttonous fear that the gizzard would also prove to be tough.

So we ate and laughed our way like gallant trenchermen through that real Thanksgiving dinner. I suppose it was not altogether elegant, but it had the flavor of tradition and romance in it.

I MUST be getting old very fast now, for I seem to be growing more critical of the ways and manners of the world. I do not seem to be able to adjust myself to the fact that this is a new world with new men and women in it who will make it the image of their own minds and ideals as we made our world stand for the faith and hopes of our youth. It cannot be as wrong as it looks to me nor so dangerously unstable. Maybe they will give up their Thanksgiving day altogether and substitute a sort of roustabout national holiday to celebrate the passing of labor and call it the Festival of Jazz!

Anyhow, it is good to be back here in my old cabin with the ancient heaven and earth above and about me. I have noticed that neither amendments, mechanics, motion pictures, joy riding, dancing, nor any of the new-fangled notions of men and women have changed them. The same silent, fertile earth; the same wind and weather; the same stars overhead; the same seasons; the same old scriptures of life to be fulfilled—He that saveth his life shall lose it; he that loseth his life for my sake shall have it again. No matter how young, or rich, or strong we are, we cannot change the eternal order, nor one law the Lord has made. We are judged by them at last and there is no escape through any worldly wisdom or philosophy contrary to His word.

I bought a few things in Atlanta, little gifts for friends. I spend a great deal of time just before Christmas making up these packages so that they will look like tokens of love, tied with ribbon and holly. I never give anything to my rich friends—I am stingy about that—but to those who have so little that the least thing looks much to them. I am taking particular pains this time doing up a pair of candlesticks for a neighbor of mine. She does not like me; I do not like her; but we are both Christian women and once in so often we try to overcome our natural antipathies toward each other. One time we lived for two years so near that the smoke from our respective chimneys could mingle if the wind blew a certain way, but without speaking. Then, one Christmas Eve night when I was alone in my house thinking of Faith who was gone, I heard a noise outside, very vague and faint, like a memory tripping by of other Christmas Eves when little Faith's stocking hung beside the fireplace to be filled. So I did not open the door. There was nothing to expect.

BUT the next morning I found a beegum upon my doorstep with a red ribbon tied around it, and a card fluttering in the wind with Christmas greetings written upon it from my neighbor!

On the strength of that little remembrance, we began to speak to each other again. We exchanged visits and vegetables for more than a year, then our good will faded for no reason at all except that we are instinctively antagonistic. Now for a long time we have not spoken. But this Christmas when her neighbors come in she will show her candlesticks and this card I am writing to go with them. We will resume our dutiful friendship and may be good neighbors for a year with these two candlesticks to bind us.

I do not know how it may be with others, but at the end of a year or the beginning of a new one I always feel like balancing the inside accounts we all keep in our hearts and starting over again with no debt of unfriendliness hanging over my head. It is the worst kind of mortgage, because, though you cannot be sued on it, still it continues to impoverish you until you either pay in the full measure of love or go bankrupt in hatred and meanness of spirit.

(TO BE CONCLUDED)

