

His Last Desire Fulfilled

By Hamlin Garland

STEPHEN THURBER had no notion of falling in with a great sociologic movement when he decided to sell his farm in Wet Cooly and move into Bluff Siding; he merely yielded to the importunities of his wife and daughter, who looked away to the prim little village down the Valley as of shining land of leisure and of possible social triumph.

It was a lonely place for the women—that Stephen generously admitted. A long ridge, some five hundred feet high, cut them off from the railway, and all the young people were leaving by twos and threes, and as fast as they grew up, and the roads were very bad, and visitors few.

So at last he sighed and said, "All right, mother, we'll go, but I'll declare I hate to give up the farm—I don't know what in time I'll do with myself."

Stephen, now that he was about to lose his treasures, recalled Martha's delight as she watched the workmen set the old oaken slab in its place. He re-lived the party she gave when the first fire was laid, and thrilled to remember how pretty she looked as she touched a match to the shavings and recited a little verse from "The Hanging of the Crane." She was cheerful and Stephen believed, happy; but when she went away he began to realize that she had never really taken root in the West, and now that he was growing old, he himself began to dwell more and more in the land of his youth, his thoughts returned often to his rocky New Hampshire intervals.

Yes, it was hardest of all to loose the tendrils of this heart from the hearth, for though Serilla had rearranged and redecorated after her own heart, Martha's fireplace remained unchanged.

"I'll let you have your way in most things, Serilla, but I want this room to look as it does now, just as she left it."

As the time for the migration drew near, Stephen stole away from the disordered kitchen to muse sadly before the fire. He had consented to a "vande," and was willing Serilla should sell all the furniture they had, except a few pieces that had been Martha's, and as there was no demand for the irons and brasses around the fireplace, he expected to box them up as broomsticks.

The cottage in town seemed to grow smaller after they moved into it; but Serilla and Cariss were delighted with its snugness, and went about extolling its "advantages" with fluent tongues. "It's small, of course; but what do we want with a big house? It's just that much less work to take care of. Besides, here we have a pump right in the kitchen, and a furnace, and a bathroom, and everything is as neat as a pin—no cracks or dark corners."

By June he was settled into a certain daily groove. "You want to just lay back and rest," said Hiram Fox, another veteran of the plow; "that's what all the rest of us are doin', and we're doin' it conscientiously. The town is full of 'tired farmers' like us."

Sometimes at night, when his wife thought him dozing, he was really back in the old Coolly house watching the blazing logs, his mind filled with a delicious sadness, his eyes wet with tears. What was it that had gone out of his life? Here he sat in a perfectly comfortable room, possessing a horse and a carriage, with an abundance to eat and no cares—and yet the past, with all his toil, so called to him that his throat ached at the thought of it. Oh, if he could only re-live it all!

In those dear days the wind was fierce, the woods of winter desolate; but Martha's face shone like a star, and the old heart rendered each night with his children a poem. Work was hard in those days; but rest was sweet. Hunger was keen; but eating brought no illness in its train.

He was loyal to Serilla, the mother of his children; but Martha was the wife of his youth, the one chosen wholly of his heart—and her fireplace came to typify all that was sweetest and most poetic in his life and in the lives of his children. It was an altar. Around it they had gathered when the corn was cribbed and the cattle housed for the night. In its light they had danced when the threshing was over and at Thanksgiving time.

He awoke with a start. "What will we do on Thanksgiving Day and at Christmas?" he asked, one night. "We can't all get into this little box of a place. There ain't a room in the house we can all sit down in, and if we could, we'd have nothing but a hole in the floor to look at. I declare it clear dishartens me."

Serilla was a little dashed, but replied, comfortably. "We'll manage somehow, I guess. We can't have but a part of the children at a time, that's all. We can bid your folks for Thanksgiving and my folks for Christmas."

This rankled in Stephen's mind, and thereafter he desisted his toy house. It was a good enough tenement—a place to rent for a while, but as a home in which to grow old, it was revolting in spite of its shining paint and spick and span new furniture.

In reality it held out no charm, no poetry, no associations; it was as rectangular as a dry-goods box, and as hopelessly prosaic as a "golden oak" wash-stand. A child born in such a house is cheated of its birthright of dim, wide rooms lit up by the dancing firelight; robbed of the sagas the great trees chant as they roar outside in the wild wind—deprived of all shadow, all suggestion. Something of this flitted through Stephen's thought, though he could not give it voice.

"Mother," he said one day, "I wish we had one room big enough to turn round in, and a rag carpet and some old-fashioned chairs and a fireplace."

"There you go again about that fireplace," exclaimed his wife irritably. "Nobody has fireplaces now, and how are you going to have a big room in this house?"

"I'll build one, if you say so."

"Nonsense. This house is all right, plenty big enough for us—with Cariss likely to go off any minute. And as for Thanksgiving and Christmas, we can go to the hotel and get dinner, or take 'em in squads here at home."

"That wouldn't do," he protested. "It wouldn't do at all. It wouldn't seem natural or right for us to go to a hotel on such days. We'd ought to have all such meals at home."

"Well, you wouldn't build a big house just to use for Thanksgiving, would you?"

"I don't know but I would," he answered, sturdily. "I know but it would be just about as good a way to spend our money as any other. I'm sick of this little coop. Let's buy the Merrill place and have room to dance a jig if we want to."

"No, sirree! You don't ketch me livin' on the edge of town, with no sidewalks. I want to be right in the centre of things, where we can have our telephone, electric lights and all."

"I could put in the telephone."

"I won't hear of it, Steve. I came away from the farm to live in town, and I don't want no half-way business in mine."

Stephen surrendered to her will and made no further complaint.

They took their Thanksgiving dinner at the hotel—and on the way home Serilla said, "There! For once in our lives, Cariss, we don't have to think of Thanksgiving dinner dishes."

"That's right," answered Cariss, "and yet it doesn't seem a bit like Thanksgiving does it, pa?"

Stephen did not answer, for he was far away in the holidays of the past.

It is a tragic thing to grow old in daily labor, but it is almost as sad to grow old with nothing to do—

and homeless. Among all his fellows Stephen alone began to perceive that to seek comfort for the body in new things left the mind filled with longing for old things—left it comfortless and unhouse-d.

So, while outwardly he remained the same, inwardly he was filled with recollections which made him tremble with their power. He greeted his neighbors with a smile which grew each month a little more absent-minded—a little more wistful—and when he wrote to his son in Chicago, he said: "Our house is about as big as your hat, and it's nice and neat, but we can't have any Christmas this year—no place to set a table for more'n six. I'm trying hard to pass the time"; and as he wrote his glasses grew misty with his tears.

But one day while he was sitting alone by his window at sunset, when the blue-jays were in flight and the butternut leaves were falling, Stephen permitted himself a most heroic dream. In imagination he said to a contractor, "I want my old house across the hill. I

right down and give him a little help—you bein' an authority on fireplaces. We all hung our stockings in chimney corners back East, but I'll be dinged if I can remember just how you put 'em in."

"It's a funny thing to me," said Hiram. "In the days when we all had fireplaces we were crazy for stoves, and now when we are all provided with furnaces some people want fireplaces. You'd think a family that had nigh about froze to death in front of a hole in the wall would fight shy of 'em thereafter."

"But they have their good p'int's," said Stephen, eagerly. "Recollect the mug o' cider on the hob, and the chestnuts in the ashes, and the apple parin's and the dances—I tell you there's nothin' takes the place of a good old—"

"Well, you can have hot cider and apple bees without a hole in the wall you can sling a yearling through. What's the matter with a base-burner?"

Stephen was stubborn. "Won't do. A base-burner

weeks of burning desire and irresolution, he had broken ground.

No one suspected his connection with the building—his plan was too audacious, too far removed from the practical, everyday life of Bluff Siding to be imagined by anyone; and yet he was tormented with dread of the storm of shrill astonishment and protest which would encircle him when his secret should be disclosed.

His hope and comfort lay in the belief that a visit to the new house all complete and ready to move into would subdue and win his wife. Of Cariss he had no fear. He also, covertly, depended upon the sympathy and support of his "Chicago Boy," as he called John; but Albert, who was a hard-working dentist in Tyre, with a large and annually increasing family (and who was casting forward very definitely to his share of the estate)—Albert would look with disfavor on the expenditure of so much money in so foolish a fashion. As for Filcher and old Hiram and the rest of the boys

As he gazed the spell of that which he had wrought fell upon him. The first stanza of his poem was being sung by the roaring flames. On the white walls the golden light was flickering—and along the ceiling the shadows of the tall andirons danced grotesquely, familiarly, as of old. The mantle with its carved figures and its candles and vases seemed unchanged. The song of the elms outside was the same.

Tears dimmed his eyes, a big lump filled his throat. For a moment he had the exaltation of the artist. He seemed to have triumphed over time's decrees as the poet does. It appeared that he had actually restored his home, reconstructed the past, so that Martha might at any moment steal into the room, light of step as of old, to sit on the arm of his chair and to ask with that tenderness of sympathy which always melted his heart, "Tired, Stephen?" and lay her cheek against his shoulder.

He loved Serilla; he honored and cared for her as the mother of his children; but Martha was the wife of his youth, the Madonna of his dreams. She was associated with the mystery of his life, the dew of his morning. The whole earth was young that marvellous May when they two adventured into this suave and fertile land. The perfume of wild honey, the song of larks in flowery meadows lay in her name, and around her fireplace still lingered such heartiness of cheer, such neighborliness as the world no longer knew. Oh, those glorious pioneer days!

He sat so long in dreams that the red sky and fire grew gray and the good people in the kitchen became uneasy, and Amos came and brought a lamp, and then with an absent-minded smile the dreamer rose, stiff with the chill of age, and went back to his acknowledged home, to the wife of his present.

He came again the next day, and the next, and the next, re-perusing with inarticulate pain and pleasure his story in stone and steel, his epic in pungent pine, basking in the glow of his fire, forgetting his gray hair and nerveless limbs in the magic of the flame. From these secret delicious excursions into the past, these communions with the dead, he returned to his wife and daughter with reluctance, with a certain guilty fear. Without meaning to be disloyal, he began to find Serilla's brusque ways intolerable, and had moments when he resolved to keep his secret. He shrank from her sharp voice, her prosaic and harsh comment. He was like a bridegroom, jealous of the very name of his love.

Amos had guessed Stephen's proprietorship of the house, but being a man of perception, he had cautioned his wife to yield no hint of their secret knowledge; and Jane was not merely discreet; she was sympathetic. She added in many little ways to Stephen's enjoyment of his home. The fire was always blazing on the hearth when he came in, and he was left alone for the most part; only upon invitation did she enter the room to sit with him before his shrine.

This understanding was mutual. Stephen knew that they were in possession of his secret, but he gave no outward sign; indeed, he kept up the fiction by greeting them as his hosts, and even went so far as to discuss the coming of "the owner" in the spring. He always expressed gratitude for a chance to sit against the fire. "I don't know what I'll do when you move out," he said once. "Well, I'll have one comfortable winter, anyway," he ended.

Serilla deeply resented his truancy, which she ascribed to the influence of Jane Kittredge, and a barrier of distrust and defense had risen between them. Cariss, involved with the young life of the village, gave very little thought to the matter, though she occasionally defended her father. "If he gets any fun out of Aunt Jane, let him," she rather flippantly remarked; and the tone of her plea did not incline Stephen to confide in her. John would understand, but he hesitated about writing. "I'll wait till he comes up a-Christmas," he decided.

His old cronies found him distinctly less companionable, more remote. A settled sadness, a growing reserve difficult of analysis, had come into his daily greeting. He told fewer stories, he was less often at the grocery store, and his laugh was seldom heard.

All this change they referred to ill-health, and their comment was gentle and commiserating. "Stephen is failin' fast," remarked Pilcher, one day. "The cold weather seems to grip him. It wouldn't surprise me to hear any day that he was taken flat down. I doubt if he stands many more of these winters."

Hiram looked up with a smile which was at once defiant and wistful. "We're all in the same boat and driftin' the same way," he said; and then they spoke with resolute cheer of the weather and the price of fire-wood.

November passed without any change of plan on Stephen's part, and December was half-way gone before he broke silence. Being moved by a letter from John, he suddenly said one night, quite in his old, hearty way, "I tell you what you do, Amos. You and Jane send out invitations to John and Albert's folks and to all of Serilla's kin, biddin' 'em all to a Christmas dinner. Say to the boys that, seein' their mother ain't got room enough, I'm kind o' goin' in with you here. You can say I'm helpin' out on the turkey and things, and the children's stockin's, and all that they can stay here—part of 'em at least. We can all get together here in this big room—" A lump came into his throat and he did not finish.

Jane and Amos fell in with the suggestion quite as if it were a command, and withdrew to write out the letters of invitation, leaving Stephen alone in the glow of the fire, for the walk that day had been a stern battle with both wind and snow, and he seemed older and feebler.

A couple of hours later, as they went downstairs to lock the doors and put out the lights, Jane said, "Look in and see how the fire in the big room is, while I see to the furnace. Mr. Hill, hear that wind!"

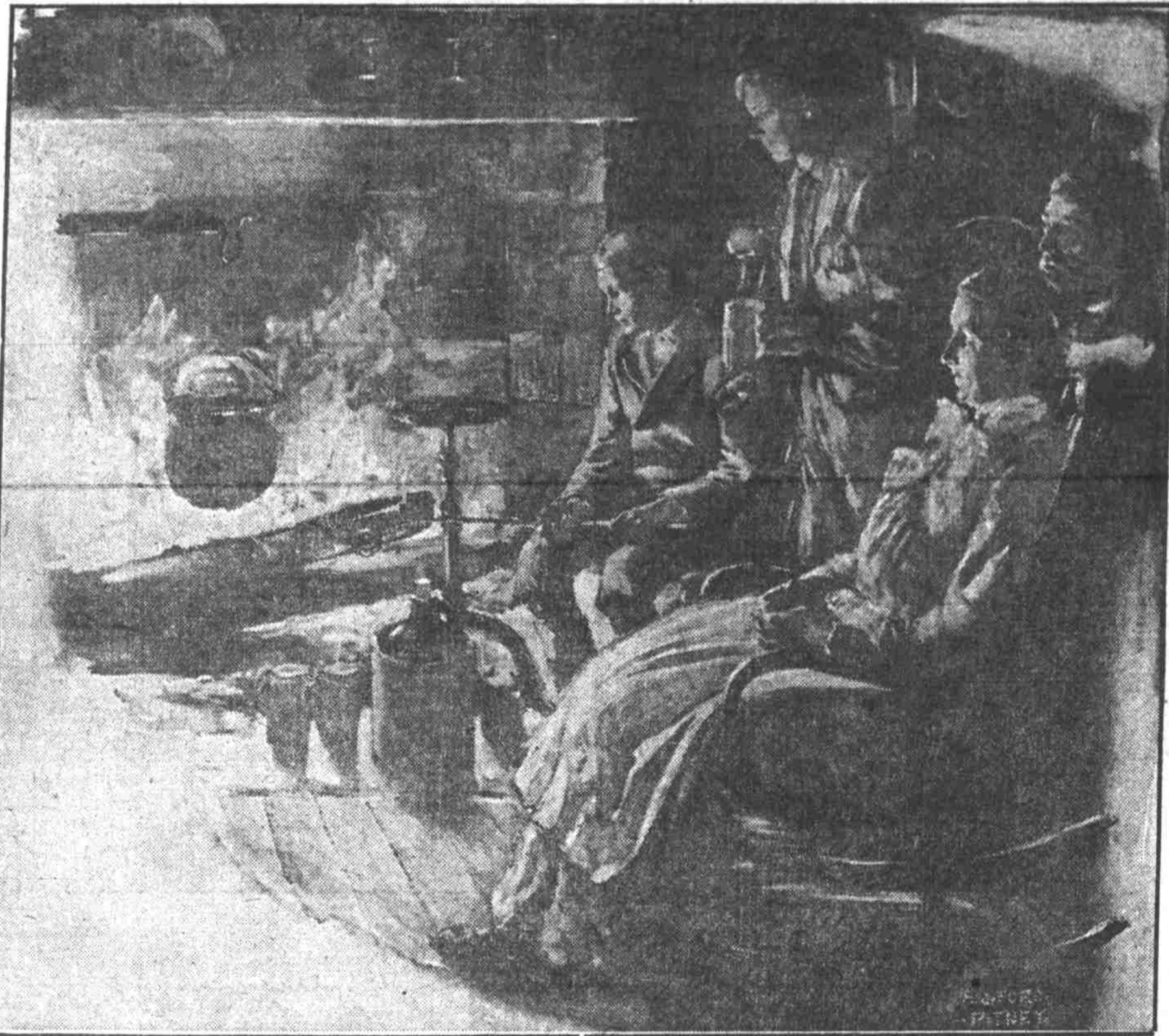
Amos opened the door, but paused on the threshold and beckoned with a smile. "Come here, Jane," he whispered. "I thought I didn't hear him go out." Jane looked over his shoulder with a word of surprise.

The fire had burned low. In a deep bed of ashes a big oaken gnarl still smoldered, sending up now and again a single leaping jet of flame, and by its fitful light Stephen was intermittently revealed, deep-sunk in his armchair, his gray head turned laxly aside, his gaunt hands hanging empty by his side.

"Better wake him," said Jane. "He'll take a chill. He'd better sleep here to-night."

Amos went over and touched the sleeper on the shoulder. He did not respond. Amos laid his hand against the grizzled cheek, and turned with a start toward his wife, a look of awe on his face—a look, a gesture which told his story instantly and with completeness.

Stephen was with Martha, and the past and the present were to him as the morning and the evening of one day.



THE WINTERS OF THAT FAR TIME WERE MADE AS CHEERY AS SUMMERS BY THE BLAZE OF THE HEARTH.

don't care what it costs. I am worth thirty thousand dollars, and if it takes half of it I want my home. My women folks will never go back to the Coolly with me, and I can't live there alone, so you must bring the old house—fireplace and all—across the ridge and put it up under the trees somewhere. I want it just as it was—can you do this?"

In this imagined conversation he was able to express himself easily; so he went on to say, "I ain't got but a little while to stay here and I want to spend my days in peace—I want to be comfortable in my mind—and my mind ain't easy in this little box; I want a roomy room with shadows in the corners and a fire to watch when I don't want to read or talk—I want the old room—"

And when his wife broke in on this magical reverie he looked up with eyes so scared and pleading that she wondered and sharply cried out, "What's the matter, Stephen? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"There, mother—there! mebbe I have," he answered, and turned away to hide the quiver of his lips.

One day he came in from his usual trip up town visibly excited, and after he had taken off his coat and hung up his hat he began:

"Well, somebody has bought the Merrill place." Serilla looked up from her sewing.

"Hiram said he heard that a man from Tyre, a contractor, had bought it and was going to build on speculation."

The Merrill place, as it was called, was the remnant of a fine farm which had once been the pride of old Aber Merrill. The house, standing among magnificent elms, commanded ten acres of land—all the rest had been sold away by the heirs. The outbuildings were in decay and the yard was littered with rusty machinery, but it was a beautiful site, and Stephen had long admired it. He never passed it without planning what he would do if he owned it. Now he said: "Well, I'm glad somebody is going to improve it, but I wish you had let me buy it."

To this Serilla made no answer.

Stephen had been "kind o' dauncy" all through the hot weather, but the work going forward on the Merrill place seemed to interest him. He fell into the habit of walking down there of a morning, and Serilla was glad of it, though she took her fling at him and his cronies.

"It's a wonder to me that you and Hiram and old man Pilcher don't get a tent and camp out in the Merrill yard. Seems to me if I was that buidler I'd order you off the premises."

"He considers our advice valuable, mother."

"I'll bet he does!" she scornfully replied.

A few days later old Hiram reported to the Committee on the "Universe," that Mr. Hill, the buidler, was getting in a big chimney and fireplace. "He says all the city people have 'em these days."

"Well, now, Steve," said Pilcher, "you better go

is such a sullen sort o' thing. No, sir. You've got to have the flames a-leapin' and a-crackin'. I'll admit you need other heat," he added, "when the weather's too cold; but I just believe we'd all be healthier if we went back to the drafty old fireplaces. It did keep the room ventilated—the bad air was all swept up the chimney."

"Yes, long with the cat and the almanac and the weekly newspaper," remarked Hiram. "My stars! but the draft in our old chimney would draw nails out of oak planks. We had to put a stun on the Bible."

"But we didn't have consumption in those days—"

"We had somethin' worse," piped Pilcher. "What's that?"

"Chillblains, by cracky!"

And then they all cackled together, and the Committee broke up.

"What's this I hear?" inquired Serilla, sharply, a few days later. "Has the owner of the Merrill place asked Jane Kittredge to go into that house?"

"I guess that's right, mother."

Serilla snorted. "Well, that's a fool thing to do—how come it? Did you advise it?"

"Well, no—Mr. Hill was sort o' inquire 'round for someone, and as Amos was sick and Jane—"

"I knew it! I knew you had a hand in that—"

"Well, why not? Amos is my brother-in-law—I've a right to help him—and Jane's a good housekeeper; you can't deny that!"

Serilla turned away. She and Jane were a little "aidgewise" toward each other—partly because Amos was Stephen's first wife's brother and partly because Jane herself was quite as sharp-tongued as any one.

Serilla had grazed her husband's larger secret, but had not really touched it—and he went out to the barn to think the situation over.

The truth was that all this buying, planning and building were stanzas in a poem of Stephen Thurber's imagining. He was the "owner," Mr. Hill was merely his confederate, his blind.

To the sympathetic young fellow he had gone (while on a visit to Tyre) and to him had explained his needs. "Now, I can't move the old house over from the Coolly, that's out of the question, but I want you to go and look it over and build me another exactly like it. Make it just as it was when I went into it for the first time, so that when I sit down by the fire I can just imagine I'm-home again." He paused there, for his voice failed him.

This was his secret pain—a sense of homelessness. All the subtle charms of his life, all the poetry of the past, was associated with the home beyond the ridge, and the sense of loss grew in power of appeal day by day as his palms softened with idleness and his cheeks lost their coat of tan. He was bitterly unhappy in his present, and in consequence his face turned more and more fully toward the lovely days of his youth. The thought of growing old on a fifty-foot lot in a cramped, high-colored little house appalled him; and so, after