

BACK HOME

By Eugene Wood

TO

THE SAINTED MEMORY
OF HER WHOM, IN THE DAYS BACK HOME,
I KNEW AS "MY MA MAG"
AND WHO WAS MORE TO ME THAN I CAN TELL, EVEN
IF MY TARDY WORDS COULD REACH HER
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

"That she who is an angel now
Might sometimes think of me"

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INTRODUCTION

GENTLE READER:—Let me make you acquainted with my book, “Back Home.” (Your right hand, Book, your right hand. Pity’s sakes! How many times have I got to tell you that? Chest up and forward, shoulders back and down, and turn your toes out more.)

It is a little book, Gentle Reader, but please don’t let that prejudice you against it. The General Public, I know, likes to feel heft in its hand when it buys a book, but I had hoped that you were a peg or two above the General Public. That mythical being goes on a reading spree about every so often, and it selects a book which will probably last out the craving, a book which “it will be impossible to lay down, after it is once begun, until it is finished.” (I quote from the standard book notice). A few hours later the following dialogue ensues:

“Henry!”

“Yes, dear.”

“Aren’t you ‘most done reading?”

“Just as soon as I finish this chapter.” A sigh and a long wait.

“Henry!”

“Yes, dear.”

“Did you lock the side-door?” No answer.

“Henry! Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Did you lock the side-door?”

“In a minute now.”

“Yes, but did you?”

“M-hm. I guess so.”

“‘Guess so!’ Did you lock that side-door? They got in at Hilliard’s night before last and stole a bag of clothes-pins.”

“M.”

“Oh, put down that book, and go and lock the side-door. I’ll not get a wink of sleep this blessed night unless you do.”

“In a minute now. Just wait till I finish this...”

“Go do it now.”

Mr. General Public has a card on his desk that says, “Do it Now,” and so he lays down his book with a patient sigh, and comes back to it with a patent grouch.

“Oh, so it is,” says the voice from the bedroom. “I remember now, I locked it myself when I put the milk-bottles out.... I’m going to stop taking of that man unless there’s more cream on the top than there has been here lately.”

“M.”

“Henry!”

“Oh, what is it?”

“Aren’t you ‘most done reading?”

“In a minute, just as soon as I finish this chapter.”

“How long is that chapter, for mercy’s sakes?”

“I began another.”

“Henry!”

“What?”

“Aren’t you coming to bed pretty soon? You know I can’t go to sleep when you are sitting up.”

“Oh, hush up for one minute, can’t ye? It’s a funny thing if I can’t read a little once in a while.”

“It’s a funny thing if I’ve got to be broke of my rest this way. As much as I have to look after. I’d hate to be so selfish.... Henry! Won’t you please put the book down and come to bed?”

“Oh, for goodness sake! Turn over and go to sleep. You make me tired.”

Every two or three hours Mrs. General Public wakes up and announces that she can’t get a wink of sleep, not a wink; she wishes he hadn’t brought the plagued old book home; he hasn’t the least bit of

consideration for her; please, please, won't he put the book away and come to bed?

He reaches "THE END" at 2:30A.M., turns off the gas, and creeps into bed, his stomach all upset from smoking so much without eating anything, his eyes feeling like two burnt holes in a blanket, and wishing that he had the sense he was born with. He'll have to be up at 6:05, and he knows how he will feel. He also knows how he will feel along about three o'clock in the afternoon. Smithers is coming then to close up that deal. Smithers is as sharp as tacks, as slippery as an eel, and as crooked as a dog's hind leg. Always looking for the best of it. You need all your wits when you deal with Smithers. Why didn't he take Mrs. General Public's advice, and get to bed instead of sitting up fuddling himself with that fool love-story?

That's how a book should be to be a great popular success, and one that all the typewriter girls will have on their desks. I am guiltily conscious that "Back Home" is not up to standard either in avoirdupois heft or the power to unfit a man for business.

Here's a book. Is it long? No. Is it exciting? No. Any lost diamonds in it? Nup. Mysterious murders? No. Whopping big fortune, now teetering this way, and now teetering that, tipping over on the Hero at the last and smothering him in an avalanche of fifty-dollar bills? No. Does She get Him? Isn't even that. No "heart interest" at all. What's the use of putting out good money to make such a book; to have a cover design for it; to get a man like A. B. Frost to draw illustrations for it, when he costs so like the mischief, when there's nothing in the book to make a man sit up till 'way past bedtime? Why print it at all?

You may search me. I suppose it's all right, but if it was my money, I'll bet I could make a better investment of it. If worst came to worst, I could do like the fellow in the story who went to the gambling-house and found it closed up, so he shoved the money under the door and went away. He'd done his part.

And yet, on the other hand, I can see how some sort of a case can be made out for this book of mine. I suppose I am wrong—I generally am in regard to everything—but it seems to me that quite a large part of the population of this country must be grown-up people. If I am right in this contention, then this large part of the population is being unjustly discriminated against. I believe in doing a reasonable amount for the aid and comfort of the young things that are just beginning to turn their hair up under, or who rub a stealthy forefinger over their upper lips to feel the

pleasant rasp, but I don't believe in their monopolizing everything. I don't think it 's fair. All the books printed—except, of course, those containing valuable information; we don't buy those books, but go to the public library for them—all the books printed are concerned with the problem of How She can get Him, and He can get Her.

Well, now. It was either yesterday morning or the day before that you looked in the glass and beheld there The First Gray Hair. You smiled a smile that was not all pure pleasure, a smile that petered out into a sigh, but nevertheless a smile, I will contend. What do you think about it? You're still on earth, aren't you? You'll last the month out, anyhow, won't you? Not at all ready to be laid on the shelf? What do you think of the relative importance of Love, Courtship, and Marriage? One or two other things in life just about as interesting, aren't there? Take getting a living, for instance. That 's worthy of one's attention, to a certain extent. When our young ones ask us: "Pop, what did you say to Mom when you courted her?" they feel provoked at us for taking it so lightly and so frivolously. It vexes them for us to reply: "Law, child! I don't remember. Why, I says to her: 'Will you have me?' And she says: 'Why, yes, and jump at the chance.' What difference does it make what we said, or whether we said anything at all? Why should we charge our memories with the recollections of those few and foolish months of mere instinctive sex-attraction when all that really counts came after, the years wherein low passion blossomed into lofty Love, the dear companionship in joy and sorrow, and in that which is more, far more than either joy or sorrow, 'the daily round, the common task?'" All that is wonderful to think of in our courtship is the marvel, for which we should never cease to thank the Almighty God, that with so little judgment at our disposal we should have chosen so wisely.

If you, Gentle Reader, found your first gray hair day before yesterday morning, if you can remember, 'way, 'way back ten or fifteen years ago... er... er... or more, come with me. Let us go "Back Home." Here's your transportation, all made out to you, and in your hand. It is no use my reminding you that no railroad goes to the old home place. It isn't there any more, even in outward seeming. Cummins's woods, where you had your robbers' cave, is all cleared off and cut up into building lots. The cool and echoing covered bridge, plastered with notices of dead and forgotten Strawberry Festivals and Public Vendues, has long ago been torn down to be replaced by a smart, red iron bridge. The Volunteer Firemen's Engine-house, whose brick wall used to flutter with the gay rags of circus-bills, is gone as if it never were at all. Where the Union Schoolhouse was is all

torn up now. They are putting up a new magnificent structure, with all the modern improvements, exposed plumbing, and spankless discipline. The quiet leafy streets echo to the hissing snarl of trolley cars, and the powerhouse is right by the Old Swimming-hole above the dam. The meeting-house, where we attended Sabbath-school, and marveled at the Greek temple frescoed on the wall behind the pulpit, is now a church with a big organ, and stained-glass windows, and folding opera-chairs on a slanting floor. There isn't any "Amen Corner," any more, and in these calm and well-bred times nobody ever gets "shouting happy."

But even when "the loved spots that our infancy knew" are physically the same, a change has come upon them more saddening than words can tell. They have shrunken and grown shabbier. They are not nearly so spacious and so splendid as once they were.

Some one comes up to you and calls you by your name. His voice echoes in the chambers of your memory. You hold his hand in yours and try to peer through the false-face he has on, the mask of a beard or spectacles, or a changed expression of the countenance. He says he is So-and-so. Why, he used to sit with you in Miss Crutcher's room, don't you remember? There was a time when you and he walked together, your arms upon each other's shoulders. But this is some other one than he. The boy you knew had freckles, and could spit between his teeth, ever and ever so far.

They don't have the same things to eat they used to have, or, if they do, it all tastes different. Do you remember the old well, with the windlass and the chain fastened to the rope just above the bucket, the chain that used to cluck-cluck when the dripping bucket came within reach to be swung upon the well-curb? How cold the water used to be, right out of the northwest corner of the well! It made the roof of your mouth ache when you drank. Everybody said it was such splendid water. It isn't so very cold these days, and I think it has a sort of funny taste to it.

Ah, Gentle Reader, this is not really "Back Home" we gaze upon when we go there by the train. It is a last year's bird's nest. The nest is there; the birds are flown, the birds of youth, and noisy health, and ravenous appetite, and inexperience. You cannot go "Back Home" by train, but here is the magic wishing-carpet, and here is your transportation in your hand all made out to you. You and I will make the journey together. Let us in heart and mind thither ascend.

I went to the Old Red School-house with you. Don't you remember me? I was learning to swim when you could go clear across the river without once "letting down." I saw you at the County Fair, and bought a slab of ice-cream candy just before you did. I was in the infant-class in Sabbath-school when you spoke in the dialogue at the monthly concert. Look again. Don't you remember me? I used to stub my toe so; you ought to recollect me by that. I know plenty of people that you know. I may not always get their names just right, but then it's been a good while ago. You'll recognize them, though; you'll know them in a minute.

EUGENE WOOD.

BACK HOME

THE OLD RED SCHOOL-HOUSE

Oh, the little old red school-house on the hill,
 (2d bass: On the hill.)
Oh, the little old red school-house on the hill,
 (2d bass: On the hi-hi-hi-yull)
 And my heart with joy o'erflows,
 Like the dew-drop in the rose,*
Thinking of the old red SCHOOL-HOUSE I o-o-on the hill,
 (2d tenor and 1st bass: The hill, the hill.)

THE MALE QUARTET'S COMPENDIUM.

* I call your attention to the chaste beauty of this line,
 and the imperative necessity of the chord of the diminished
 seventh for the word "rose." Also "school-house" in the
 last line must be very loud and staccato. Snap it off.

If the audience will kindly come forward and occupy the vacant seats in the front of the hall, the entertainment will now begin. The male quartet will first render an appropriate selection and then.... Can't you see them from where you are? Let me assist you in the visualization.

The first tenor, the gentleman on the extreme left, is a stocky little man, with a large chest and short legs conspicuously curving inward. He has plenty of white teeth, ash-blond hair, and goes smooth-shaven for purely personal reasons. His round, dough-colored face will never look older (from a distance) than it did when he was nine. The flight of years adds only deeper creases in the multitude of fine wrinkles, and increasing difficulty in hoisting his tiny, patent-leather foot up on his plump knee.

The second tenor leans toward him in a way to make another man anxious about his watch, but the second tenor is as honest as the day. He is only "blending the voices." He works in the bank. He is going to be married in June sometime. Don't look around right away, but she's the one in the pink shirt-waist, the second one from the aisle, the one... two... three... the sixth row back. See her? Say, they've got it bad, those two. What d' ye think? She goes down by the bank every day at noon, so as to walk up with him to luncheon. She lives across the street, and as soon as ever she has finished her luncheon, there she is, out on the front porch hallooing: "Oo-hoo!" How about that? And if he so much as looks at another girl—m-M!

The first bass is one of these fellows with a flutter in his voice. No, I don't mean a vibrato. It's a flutter, like a goat's tail. It is considered real operatic.

The second bass has a great, big Adam's apple that slides up and down his throat like a toy-monkey on a stick. He is tall, and has eyebrows like clothes-brushes, and he scowls fit to make you run and hide under the bed. He is really a good-hearted fellow, though. Pity he has the dyspepsia so bad. Oh, my, yes! Suffers everything with it, poor man. He generally sings that song about "Drink-ing! DRINK-ang! Drink-awng!" though he's strictly temperate himself. When he takes that last low note, you hold on to your chair for fear you'll fall in too.

But why bring in the male quartet?

Because "The Little Old Red School-house" is more than a mere collocation of words, accurately descriptive. It is what Mat King would call a "symblem," and as such requires the music's dying fall to lull and enervate a too meticulous and stringent tendency to recollect that it wasn't little, or old, or red, or on a hill. It might have been big and new, and built of yellow brick, right next to the Second Presbyterian, and hence close to the "branch," so that the spring freshets flooded the playground, and the water lapped the base of the big rock on which we played "King on the Castle,"—the big rock so pitifully dwindled of late years. No matter what the facts are. Sing 'of "The Little Old Red Schoolhouse On the Hill" and in everybody's heart a chord trembles in unison. As we hear its witching strains, we are all lodge brethren, from Maine to California and far across the Western Sea; we are all lodge brethren, and the air is "Auld Lang Syne," and we are clasping hands across, knitted together into one living solidarity; and this, if we but sensed it, is the real Union, of which the federal compact is but the outward seeming. It is a Union in which they have neither art nor part whose parents sent them to private schools, so as not to have them associate with "that class of people." It is the true democracy which batters down the walls that separate us from each other—the walls of caste distinction, and color prejudice, and national hatred, and religious contempt, all the petty, anti-social meannesses that quarrel with

"The Union of hearts, the Union of hands,
And the flag of our Union forever."

Old Glory has floated victoriously on many a gallant fight by sea and land, but never do its silver stars glitter more bravely or its blood-red stripes curve more proudly on the fawning breeze than when it floats above the

school-house, over the daily battle against ignorance and prejudice (which is ignorance of our fellows), for freedom and for equal rights. It is no mere pretty sentimentality that puts the flag there, but the serious recognition of the bed-rock principle of our Union: That we are all of one blood, one bounden duty; that all these anti-social prejudices are just as shameful as illiteracy, and that they must disappear as soon as ever we shall come to know each other well. Knowledge is power. That is true. And it is also true: A house divided against itself cannot stand.

“The Flag of our Union forever!” is our prayer, our heart’s desire for us and for our children after us. Heroes have died to give us that, heroes that with glazing eyes beheld the tattered ensign and spent their latest breath to cheer it as it passed on to triumph. “We who are about to die salute thee!” The heart swells to think of it. But it swells, too, to think that, day by day, thousands upon thousands of little children stretch out their hands toward that Flag and pledge allegiance to it. “We who are about to LIVE salute thee!”

It is no mere chance affair that all our federal buildings should be so ugly and so begrudged, and that our school-houses should be so beautiful architecturally—the one nearest my house is built from plans that took the first prize at the Paris Exposition, in competition with the whole world—so well-appointed, and so far from being grudged that the complaint is, that there are not enough of them.

That So-and-so should be the President, and such-and-such a party have control is but a game we play at, amateurs and professionals; the serious business is, that in this country no child, how poor soever it may be, shall have the slightest let or hindrance in the equal chance with every other child to learn to read, and write, and cipher, and do raffia-work.

It is a new thing with us to have splendid school-houses. After all, the norm, as you might say, is still “The Old Red School-house.” You must recollect how hard the struggle is for the poor farmer, with wheat only a dollar a bushel, and eggs only six for a quarter; with every year or so taxes of three and sometimes four dollars on an eighty-acre farm grinding him to earth. It were folly to expect more in rural districts than a tight box, with benches and a stove in it. Never-the-less, it is the thing signified more than its outward seeming that catches and holds the eye upon the country school-house as you drive past it. You count yourself fortunate if, mingled with the creaking of the buggy-springs, you hear the hum of recitation; yet more fortunate if it is recess time, and you can see the children out at play,

the little girls holding to one another's dress-tails as they solemnly circle to the chant:

“H-yar way gow rand tha malbarry bosh,
Tha malbarry bosh, tha malbarry bosh,
H-yar way gow rand tha malbarry bosh
On a cay-um and frasty marneng.”

The boys are at marbles, if it is muddy enough, or one-old-cat, or pom-pom-peel-away, with the normal percentage of them in reboant tears—that is to say, one in three.

But even this is not the moment of illumination, when it comes upon you like a flood how glorious is the land we live in, upon what sure and certain footing are its institutions, when we know by spiritual insight that whatsoever be the trial that awaits us, the people of these United States, we shall be able for it! Yes. We shall be able for it.

If you would learn the secret of our nation's greatness, take your stand some winter's morning just before nine o'clock, where you can overlook a circle of some two or three miles' radius, the center being the Old Red School-house. You will see little figures picking their way along the miry roads, or ploughing through the deep drifts, cutting across the fields, all drawing to the school-house, Bub in his wammus and his cowhide boots, his cap with ear-laps, a knitted comforter about his neck, and his hands glowing in scarlet mittens; and little Sis, in a thick shawl, trudging along behind him, stepping in his tracks. They chirrup, “Good-morning, sir!” As far as you can see them you have to watch them, and something rises in your throat. Lord love 'em! Lord love the children!

And then it comes to you, and it makes you catch your breath to think of it, that every two or three miles all over this land, wherever there are children at all, there is the Old Red Schoolhouse. At this very hour a living tide, upbearing the hopes and prayers of God alone knows how many loving hearts, the tide on which all of our longed-for ships are to come in, is setting to the school-house. Oh, what is martial glory, what is conquest of an empire, what is state-craft alongside of this? Happy is the people that is in such a case!

The city schools are now the pattern for the country schools: but in my day, although a little they were pouring the new wine of frothing educational reform into the old bottles, they had not quite attained the full distention of this present. We still had some kind of a good time, but

nothing like the good times they had out at the school near grandpap's, where I sometimes visited. There you could whisper! Yes, sir, you could whisper. So long as you didn't talk out loud, it was all right. And there was no rising at the tap of the bell, forming in line and walking in lock-step. Seemingly it never entered the school-board's heads that anybody would ever be sent to state's prison. They left the scholars unprepared for any such career. They have remedied all that in city schools. Now, when a boy grows up and goes to Sing Sing, he knows exactly what to do and how to behave. It all comes back to him.

But what I call the finest part of going to school in the country was, that you didn't go home to dinner. Grandma had a boy only a few years older than I was, and when I went a-visiting, she fixed us up a "piece." They call it "luncheon" now, I think—a foolish, hybrid mongrel of a word, made up of "lump," a piece of bread, and "noon," and "shenk," a pouring or drink. But the right name is "piece." What made this particular "piece" taste so wonderfully good was that it was in a round-bottomed basket woven of splints dyed blue, and black and red, and all in such a funny pattern. It was an Indian basket. My grandma's mother, when she was a little girl, got that from the squaw of old Chief Wiping-Stick.

The "piece" had bread-and-butter (my grandma used to let me churn for her sometimes, when I went out there), and some of the slices had apple-butter on them. (One time she let me stir the cider, when it was boiling down in the big kettle over the chunk-fire out in the yard. The smoke got in my eyes.) Sometimes there was honey from the hives over by the gooseberry bushes—the gooseberries had stickers on them—and we had slices of cold, fried ham. (I was out at grandpap's one time when they butchered. They had a chunk-fire then, too, to heat the water to scald the hogs. And say! Did your grandma ever roast pig's tails in the ashes for you?) And there were crullers. No, I don't mean "doughnuts." I mean crullers, all twisted up. They go good with cider. (Sometimes my grandma cut out thin, pallid little men of cruller dough, and dropped them into the hot lard for my Uncle Jimmy and me. And when she fished them out, they were all swelled up and "pussy," and golden brown).

And there was pie. Neither at the school nooning nor at the table did one put a piece of pie upon a plate and haggle at it with a fork. You took the piece of pie up in your hand and pointed the sharp end toward you, and gently crowded it into your face. It didn't require much pressure either.

And there were always apples, real apples. I think they must make apples in factories nowadays. They taste like it. These were real ones, picked off

the trees. Out at grandpap's they had bellflowers, and winesaps, and seek-no-furthers, and, I think, sheep-noses, and one kind of apple that I can't find any more, though I have sought it carefully. It was the finest apple I ever set a tooth in. It was the juiciest and the spiciest apple. It had sort of a rollicking flavor to it, if you know what I mean. It certainly was the ne plus ultra of an apple. And the name of it was the rambo. Dear me, how good it was! think I'd sooner have one right now than great riches. And all these apples they kept in the apple-hole. You went out and uncovered the earth and there they were, all in a big nest of straw; and such a gush of perfume distilled from that pile of them that just to recollect it makes my mouth all wet.

They had a big red apple in those days that I forget the name of. Oh, it was a whopper! You'd nibble at it and nibble at it before you could get a purchase on it. Then, after you got your teeth in, you'd pull and pull, and all of a sudden the apple would go "tock!" and your head would fly back from the recoil, and you had a bite about the size of your hand. You "chomped" on it, with your cheek all bulged out, and blame near drowned yourself with the juice of it.

Noon-time the girls used to count the seeds:

"One I love, two I love, three my love I see;
Four I love with all my heart, and five I cast away.
Six he loves; seven she loves; eight... eight..."

I forget what eight is, and all that follows after. And then the others would tease her with, "Aw, Jennie!" knowing who it was she had named the apple for, Wes. Rinehart, or 'Lonzo Curl, or whoever. And you'd be standing there by the stove, kind of grinning and not thinking of anything in particular when somebody would hit you a clout on your back that just about broke you in two, and would tell you "to pass it on," and you'd pass it on, and the next thing was you'd think the house was coming down. Such a chasing around and over benches, and upsetting the water-bucket, and tearing up Jack generally that teacher would say, "Boys! boys! If you can't play quietly, you'll have to go out of doors!" Play quietly! Why, the idea! What kind of play is it when you are right still?

Outdoors in the country, you can whoop and holler, and carry on, and nobody complains to the board of health. And there are so many things you can do. If there is just the least little fall of snow you can make a big wheel, with spokes in it, by your tracking. I remember that it was called "fox and geese," but that's all I can remember about it. If there was a little

more snow you tried to wash the girls' faces in it, and sometimes got yours washed. If there was a good deal of wet snow you had a snowball fight, which is great fun, unless you get one right smack dab in your ear—oh, but I can't begin to tell you all the fun there is at the noon hour in the country school, that the town children don't know anything about. And when it was time for school to "take up," there wasn't any forming in line, with a monitor to run tell teacher who snatched off Joseph Humphreys' cap and flung it far away, so he had to get out of the line, and who did this, and who did that—no penitentiary business at all. Teacher tapped on the window with a ruler, and the boys and girls came in, red-faced and puffing, careering through the aisles, knocking things off the desks with many a burlesque, "oh, exCUSE me!" and falling into their seats, bursting into sniggers, they didn't know what at. They had an hour and a half nooning. Counting that it took five minutes to shovel down even grandma's beautiful "piece," that left an hour and twenty-five minutes for roaring, romping play. If you want to know, I think that is fully as educational and a far better preparation for life than sitting still with your nose stuck in a book.

In the city schools they don't think so. Even the stingy fifteen minutes' recess, morning and afternoon, has been stolen from the children. Instead is given the inspiring physical culture, all making silly motions together in a nice, warm room, full of second-hand air. Is it any wonder that one in every three that die between fifteen and twenty-five, dies of consumption?

You must have noticed that almost everybody that amounts to anything spent his early life in the country. The city schools have great educational advantages; they have all the up-to-date methods, but the output of the Old Red Schoolhouse compares very favorably with that of the city schools for all that. The two-mile walk, morning and evening, had something to do with it, not only because it and the long nooning were good exercise, but because it impressed upon the mind that what cost so much effort to get must surely be worth having. But I think I know another reason.

If the city child goes through the arithmetic once, it is as much as ever. In the Old Red School-house those who hadn't gone through the arithmetic at least six times, were little thought of. In town, the last subject in the book was "Permutation," to which you gave the mere look its essentially frivolous nature deserved. It was: "End of the line. All out!" But in the country a very important department followed. It was called "Problems." They were twisters, able to make "How old is Ann?" look like a last year's bird's nest. They make a big fuss about the psychology of the child's mind nowadays. Well, I tell you they couldn't teach the man that got up that

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