

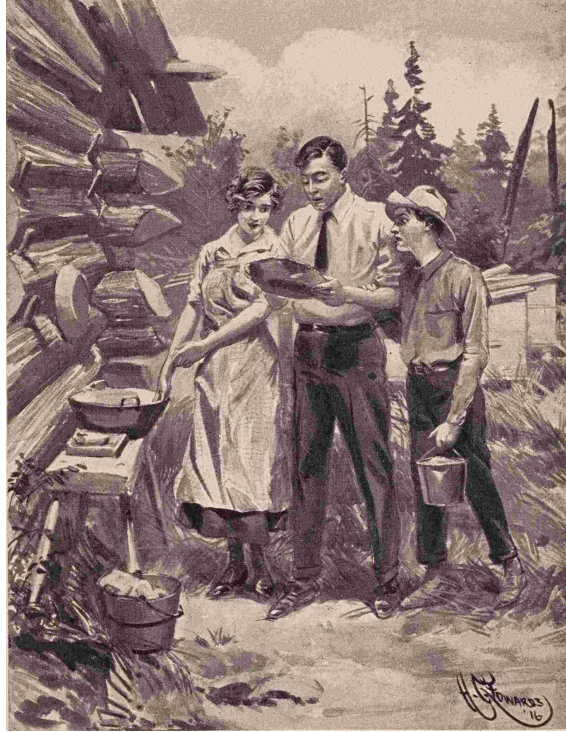
WILDERNESS HONEY

BY
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WILDERNESS HONEY



“Poison!” exclaimed Alice. “Why, it must have been meant to kill the bees!”

TO ROSA
WHO HAS HELPED ME TO HARVEST
SO MUCH HONEY IN THE
WILDERNESS

This story has appeared serially in the “Youth’s Companion,” and my thanks are due the publishers for permission to reprint it.

FRANK LILLIE POLLOCK.

The publishers also wish to acknowledge the courtesy of the “Youth’s Companion” in arranging for the use of the pictures.

WILDERNESS HONEY

CHAPTER I

THE BEE FEVER

“We’ll have to sell the store,” said Bob Harman, with decision. “No use blinking it.”

“What, sell Harman’s!” cried his sister Alice, aghast.

“Well, why not?” Bob demanded. “It’s bringing nothing in. It hasn’t been paying expenses for ever so long. We’d all be richer if it had been sold years ago.”

“Very likely,” muttered Carl. “But fancy Harman’s going out of the family!”

All three turned and looked at the weatherbeaten side of the frame building adjoining the house—the store that for half a century had been known as “Harman’s.” It had been a great place in its day, had Harman’s. Almost the first recollections of all three children were connected with the store. They had played behind the counters, been weighed on the big scales; and the familiar, rich smell of molasses and tea and hardware and cloth was like an odor of home. Later they had helped to serve customers—it did not keep them very busy—and for the last year Carl had managed the business almost single-handed. It did seem impossible to give up the store.

The three orphans were holding a council on the front veranda of the old brick house where the Harmans had lived ever since they came as pioneers into Upper Canada. Once there had been three hundred acres of land, and capacious barns and stables, and stock,

but all this had dwindled away, till the farm was represented by ten acres behind the house, and even this was rented to a neighbor.

The April sunshine was warm on the veranda, although the fields were still brown, and patches of snow lay here and there in sheltered nooks. The maples at the roadside were red, and in Alice's garden green sprouts were bravely pushing up. On the south side of the fence were the twelve white-painted hives of her bees, and the hum of flying insects filled the air.

Nearly eighty years before the Harmans had been among the first pioneers who broke into the wilderness north of Lake Ontario. They had helped to open the roads; they had cleared land; and they had started a frontier store on the new highway. For two generations the hamlet that sprang up there was known as "Harman's Corners." It lay on the direct road to Toronto and it had its great days before the railway came. In winter the laden sleighs went past by scores, carrying wheat and meat and timber to the growing city, and the drivers all stopped at the cross-road. The Corners supported three taverns, all doing a thriving trade. The fourth corner was occupied by the store.

As there were no other stores in that district, Harman's had a monopoly of trade, and its owner should have grown rich. But the Harman of that day lacked business enterprise. He was good-natured, slow, procrastinating, and spent more time at the taverns than behind his counter. The store lost ground, and when the railway was built and passed three miles away to touch at Woodville, the Corners received its death-blow.

Produce went to Toronto by rail instead of by sleigh or wagon. Harman's was out of the line of traffic. The three taverns closed

one by one. At Woodville the Elliott Brothers established an enterprising store, with all the modern tricks of trade. The farmers went thither to do their buying, and Harman's stock grew shop-worn and out of date.

Still, Mr. Harman clung to the business, keeping no proper books, but cherishing a vague idea that the store was maintaining his family, while, in fact, it was losing money daily, and all but ten acres of the farm had to be sold. For the last two years he had been ill; for nearly a year Carl had had virtually entire management and had discovered the truth. During this time the Elliott Brothers had repeatedly offered to buy the store. They wished to run it as a branch of their Woodville establishment, and Carl had urged his father to sell. Mr. Harman, however, refused to entertain the idea for a moment, and remained firm up to that March day when he died. Mrs. Harman had died four years earlier, and the three children were orphans, with what looked like a losing inheritance.

Alice was eighteen years old and had been keeping house for the family ever since her mother's death. She was tall, brown-haired, and gray-eyed; an out-of-door girl, full of energy. She was a great chicken-raiser and an indefatigable gardener. The bees she had had for three years, starting with three hives, and had already acquired a very cheerful bank account of her own from the sale of honey.

Bob was nineteen, dark-haired, rather short, and powerfully built. His turn of mind was highly scientific and practical, and he was trying to get through a course of electrical engineering at the Toronto School of Science, where he was better known as a half-back on the varsity team.

Carl was a year and a half younger than Alice and was her chief assistant with the bees, but he lacked his brother's muscles. He had an idea that something in journalism would suit him exactly, but it was a long way from Harman's Corners to a daily newspaper office. Meanwhile he looked after the store and attended the Woodville High School when he could, riding to and fro on his bicycle, and tried to prepare for the university.

But educational prospects looked rather bad just then. Everything had to be subordinated to the question of making a living, and Bob had come up from Toronto to help in threshing the matter out.

All the property had been left to the three children, and an old neighbor and friend, Isaac Ferguson, was appointed executor and trustee till the heirs should come of age. But an inventory of the property revealed a disastrous state of affairs.

All the land and buildings were heavily mortgaged. Although no proper books had been kept, it was plain that the store had not been paying expenses for a long time, and there was an appalling collection of unpaid bills—many of them bills for stock that had grown old and worthless. When all these liabilities were cleared off, there would not remain much more than a thousand dollars from Mr. Harman's estate.

Part of this state of things was no surprise to Carl, who had been in closer touch with the business than either Alice or Bob, but even he rather inclined to the idea that it would be best to clear out the old stock at any price, get in some fresh stuff, and try to float the business for a little longer, at any rate.

“Even if we did sell out,” he argued, “we wouldn't get enough to live on for long, and we'd have no chance of making any more.”

“Elliott’s would pay one of us forty dollars a month to stay here as clerk. I was talking to them yesterday,” responded Bob. “That would be a good job for Alice.”

“No, I’ll never do that, and I don’t see how you could go to see those people!” cried Alice, hotly. “If I only had a hundred hives of bees like these we wouldn’t need anything from anybody,” she went on after a moment’s indignation. “Why, last year I made over one hundred and twenty-five dollars from only eleven hives.”

“I wish we had them, too,” said Carl, “but we haven’t, so what’s the use. Bees cost about ten dollars a colony here and hard to get at that. I declare, Allie, you could get nearly as much for your apiary as the store is worth!”

“I wouldn’t sell them, though, not for twenty dollars a hive!” the girl declared. “I’d rather see the store go, by a great deal. What do you think we ought to do, Bob?”

“I don’t know,” returned her brother, slowly. “Maybe I’ve an idea, but the present question to be settled is whether we want to accept Elliott’s proposition—to buy us out, I mean.”

They discussed the worrying problem all the rest of the afternoon and at supper and during the evening and at intervals the next day. Then Bob had to return to his classes in Toronto and he went away, leaving the matter still unsettled.

Spring came on with the breathless haste of the North. The last patches of snow vanished. The grass grew greener daily; tulips were budding; and the bees were gathering honey profusely from the pussy-willows. Alice and Carl went through the hives, cleared out the winter’s dirt from the bottom-boards, spaced the combs

properly, scraped away excrescences of wax and propolis. They were so engaged, when Bob suddenly appeared without any warning, ten days after his departure.

“Hurrah! What’s up?” shouted Carl, pulling off his hat and bee-veil and rushing to meet him. “You’ve got some news. I can see it.”

“Nothing much,” returned Bob. “Anyway I won’t say anything about it just now. Go ahead with your work. And, say, have you got an extra hat and veil? I’d like to look on.”

Bob had never handled the bees much, nor taken any great interest in them, so that both Carl and Alice were surprised at his request. However, they were too busy at the moment to discuss it, and he was provided with a mosquito-net veil, which he draped about his hat. He leaned over the hives as they were opened, peered in, and asked innumerable questions.

“What’s happened to you, Bob?” said Alice at last. “You seem to want to learn the bee business.”

“Maybe,” said Bob, enigmatically. “Now what’s the best the bees ever do, Alice? How much honey do you get from them, on an average?”

“Well, this is my pet colony,” said the girl, raising the cover from the hive nearest her. Under the board cover was a canvas quilt, which she peeled up, revealing the tops of the combs, each in its wooden frame. At the disturbance, a yellow froth of bees boiled up from between the combs, but Alice unhesitatingly laid hold of one of the center combs and lifted it out for inspection. It was covered on both sides with a thick layer of bees, crowded as closely as they

could stand. There were some old veterans that had wintered over, with shiny, worn bodies and ragged wings; there were just-hatched bees, fluffy and yellow like young chickens; there were bees with yellow balls of pollen on their legs, looking for an empty cell to store the bee-bread. They all remained quiet, seeming but little disconcerted at being lifted so suddenly into the daylight. Only the bees near the top of the comb, where a little honey shone in the cells, dipped their heads and began to suck it up in haste. They felt that, if this strange earthquake was going to destroy the hive, they would at least save what they could. Over Alice's fingers and bare wrists the bees crawled, but made no attempt to sting. They were the purest Italian breed and were almost as yellow as gold.

"I paid a dollar and a half for this queen last year," said Alice, "and—look, there she is now."

She indicated a point about the center of the comb, where the queen, twice the length of a worker-bee but much more slender, was walking slowly and with dignity over the cells, looking into each one to see if it held anything. Finding one unoccupied, she gravely inserted the point of her long abdomen into it and deposited an egg. During this process she was attentively watched by her own guard of half a dozen bees, who kept their heads always pointed toward her, and proffered her honey on their tongues when she had finished. Day and night, Alice explained, this went on, a good queen often laying a couple of thousand eggs in twenty-four hours. These eggs, hatching in three weeks, mean a vast army of workers for the honey harvest.

"This colony brought me in more than twenty-five dollars last year, all by itself," said Alice, putting the comb carefully back into the hive. "It gathered something over a hundred pounds of comb

honey, worth twenty-five cents a pound. If one had a whole apiary like that!—but such things never happen. On the average, it's a good colony that makes ten dollars' worth of honey, and less than that, of course, if you were running a large apiary and only getting wholesale prices."

"Well, I call that good enough," remarked Bob and said no more until that evening after supper, when he consented to bring out what was in his mind.

"It was only a vague notion that I got in my head," he explained, "from what Alice said about wanting a hundred hives of bees. Perhaps there's nothing in it yet. I don't know. But anyhow, there's a fellow in our class who lives at a place called Morton, away up in northern Haliburton, and he mentioned to me about a month ago that a man up his way had a lot of bees for sale. I wasn't especially interested then, but when I went back to town last time, I thought of it and made further inquiries. Then I wrote to the owner. Then I felt as if I ought to go up and look into the thing, so I went."

"You've been there? How many hives? What's it like?" cried Alice and Carl together.

"Just got back. Well, it's about the wildest, roughest place I ever saw. The bee outfit is fourteen miles from the railroad, away back in the woods, and you can take your choice of driving over a fearfully rocky trail or going up the river in a boat or tramping it. The bees are on a deserted backwoods farm, where nobody has lived for nearly a year. Goodness knows why anybody ever went there in the first place. But the bees are there all right—a hundred and eighty colonies, all packed outdoors in big sawdust cases. It was too cold to open the hives, but the bees were flying and

seemed in good shape. Very few, if any, were dead. Then there's a great heap of apparatus stored in the barn, a honey-extractor, empty combs, supers for comb-honey, smokers—a regular outfit, in fact.”

“Yes, but the price?” demanded Carl, anxiously.

“Fifteen hundred dollars.”

“That settles it, then,” said Alice, with a disappointed sigh.

“Oh, there's such a thing as buying on easy terms,” returned Bob. “Those bees belonged to a man who had no more sense than to try to start a farm among the rocks. I'm certain he never made anything out of the land, but he surely did have the right instinct for beekeeping. He died sometime ago, his wife and children moved away, and I guess everything he owned was mortgaged, including the bees. Anyway, the whole outfit has come into the hands of the owner of the mortgage, who lives at Morton—a queer character, if there ever was one. He doesn't know what to do with all those bees. Last summer he hired a man to look after them, and the fellow either cheated or muddled, for old Farr—that's his name—told me that there wasn't much money in bees, and he thought of melting the combs all down for the wax. But he'd be glad to sell them and take easy payments.

“He'd let us keep them on the land rent-free, and he'd take five hundred dollars cash down. When we sell the summer's honey we pay another five hundred dollars, and the rest in one year, with interest at ten per cent., a chattel mortgage on the bees and positive assurance that he'll sell us out if we don't come down with the money on the required dates.”

“Could we handle a hundred and eighty colonies? We’ve never had over a dozen here, you know,” said Carl, dubiously.

“I’ll guarantee that we could handle them. I’ll see to that!” cried Alice. “But could we make the money?”

“I believe we could,” said Bob, earnestly. “The woods up there are full of solid masses of wild raspberry thickets for miles around, where the timber has been cut or burned over. Nothing yields honey like the raspberry bloom, they tell me. There’s lots of basswood, too. Shouldn’t we be able to get a hundred pounds of honey to the hive, Alice?”

“It sounds to me as if we ought to. It depends on the weather, of course.”

“Well, at ten cents a pound wholesale, that makes eighteen hundred dollars that we could count on this year, and next year we should get far more, for the bees would have increased. Why,” he exclaimed, growing enthusiastic, “I don’t see how we could possibly lose on it!”

“No clover up there, I suppose?” asked Carl.

“No, nor grass either. Nothing much but rocks and sand, hemlock and jack-pine and birch, wild raspberries, and little lakes, and a deep river that runs right through the bee farm.”

“We’d camp out there!” exclaimed Alice.

“No, there’s a log-house that we can live in. But I’ll tell you one thing—living up there wouldn’t cost us much. I must have seen fifty partridges on my way in, and the man that drove me told me that there are lots of deer, and now and then a bear. Once in a

while a moose strays down from the North, and there must be ducks on the river. I know it's swarming with trout. Of course we'd be taking a chance on the season. It's generally either a feast or a famine with the bees—a big crop or a failure—but what do you say?"

"Take the chance! Take it!" cried Alice, jumping up in excitement.

"It does seem too good a thing to lose," said Carl. "But we hardly want to exile ourselves up there in the north woods for years, do we?"

"Why not? I think it would be glorious!" said his sister. "But we don't have to. The bees need to be looked after for only four or five months of the year. They've been up there for over a year, with hardly any attention at all, and they've got on all right. We can leave there in October, sell our honey, and come back here, or go to the city, or do anything—take a trip to Europe, if we've had a good season. Carl can go to the university. Don't you see that it's the very thing for us? It's the solution of all our difficulties."

"The backwoods all summer, and the city in winter! It would give us some variety in life, anyway," said Carl.

"Yes, and there's no way of making money so nice as keeping bees. It's sweet and clean and honest. It's kid-glove work, too, not muddy and dirty, like farming. And it's all scientific and fascinating. Every colony has its own peculiar nature that has to be studied. Some you can pet, and some you have to bully. No one could ever make any success with bees who didn't feel the fascination and wasn't full of the love of the thing."

“Well, you’ve got love of it enough to supply the rest of us, Alice, though I believe we’d all like it,” said Bob. “But we mustn’t forget that we can’t do anything without Mr. Ferguson’s consent. We’re infants in the eyes of the law, and he’s our guardian.”

It was too late to go to see Mr. Ferguson that evening, but they talked over the scheme till nearly midnight. They went into all the details and made calculations of their probable profits, till they had worked themselves up into a high stage of enthusiasm. As Bob said, it hardly seemed possible to lose. With a hundred and eighty colonies of bees in a good honey district, they were sure to make some money; but they began to feel desperately afraid that Mr. Ferguson could not be made to see it in the same light.

The next morning they went to see him in a body, primed with arguments. To their delight, however, they found him by no means obdurate. Their guardian was an elderly, shrewd farmer, who saw clearly that the store could never be made to pay, and he had been pondering for some time upon the best investment for the orphans’ inheritance. He promptly advised them to make the best bargain with the Elliott Brothers that they could, but the idea of the apiary came upon him as a shock.

“Fifteen hundred dollars worth of bees!” he said doubtfully. “A pretty big order, ain’t it?”

Alice and Carl plunged at him with arguments and examples. Mr. Ferguson, however, knew the success that Alice had made with her bees, and he was willing to listen, questioning them closely about probable crops, prices, and risks. He seemed in a fair way to be convinced, but refused to give any answer at once, saying that he was going to get the opinion of a cousin of his near Toronto, who

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