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PARTRIDGE

By BEN AMES WILLIAMS

ILLUSTRATED BY W. H. D. KOERNER

SOUTHWARD from Fraternity village the road ascends a stiff grade for half a mile, then forks. One fork climbs still higher, to the crest of the ridge, and follows that crest for half a score of miles, an overwhelming panorama of valleys and far hills unrolling on either hand. The other fork skirts the flank of the ridge, now dipping a little, now climbing again, to drop at last into the valley of the George's River. A little way beyond the fork, on the left-hand side of the road, the old Law place stands. Three generations of Laws had been born there before the blood thinned and the family dwindled. The little house had been long deserted; the roof and siding of the barn were rotting away; the sheds for wood, for chickens and for pigs were sagging into shapeless hovels. Below the house a score or so of ancient apple trees had surrendered to the thriving growth of suckers which overwhelmed them; under the rigors of winter some of them died and dried where they stood, branches slowly rotting off and falling away. These apple trees were on a steep slope; from the windows of the house one overlooked them to the valley below, where a twenty-year-old growth of hackmatack and hemlock and pine, pushing up through the birches, had taken possession of the old pasture and now served to screen the river which meandered within the shades of the wood. Beyond and to the southward the eye ranged down the wooded valley along a vista full of beauty, to come to rest at last upon the hills far away.

In May a carpenter by the name of Mulock came out from East Harbor, inquiring his way to the Law place. He stopped at Will Bissell's store, and in response to Will's inquiries said that Betty Law was coming home to live. He knew no more about her, save that she now dwelt in Portland and that he had heard she painted pictures. Her mother and father were dead and, though an uncle or two and an aunt still survived, the place was hers.

"I guess she don't figure to farm any," Mulock told Bissell. "She wants I should fix up the barn for a kind of studio, and just make the house so she can live in it."

"That's right good land too," Will commented. "It's the earliest land in town. Things get a quick start there."

"She's fixing to spend some money on it," Mulock remarked. "I just come out today to see what needed doing, but she wants the barn fixed up anyhow, and the house if it will stand it."

"The farm ain't worth hardly anything the way it is," Will said. "Just about what the lumber on it would bring."



"I Didn't Know You Had Folks Coming." "Get Down," She Invited. "I Want You to Meet These People"

in these bedrooms were in the gable ends, small and inadequate. Roof leaks had worked havoc here.

The man, with a notebook in his hand, slowly itemized the tasks that needed doing. During the following week he wrote Miss Law and had in reply voluminous directions. Eventually, with another man to help him, and lumber from the mill on the George's, two miles away, he set to work.

He began by tearing down the detached sheds. The easiest way of disposing of the resulting litter of shingles and boards and studding would have been to burn them; but in New England, where the winters are long and cold and coal is hard to come by, fuel is of value, so Mulock heaped this stuff in a pile and hired Lee Motley's boy to reduce the fragments to a size convenient for use in the stove. He then put the woodshed in condition to receive them.

On the house itself he began at the bottom, replacing sills and floor timbers; shifted to the roof and spliced a rafter or two and put on new shingles. In the process he

Mulock asked whether there were men in town who could help him, and Bissell was doubtful. "They've got their farming to do," he explained. "But maybe in a couple of weeks you could get someone."

When he left the store the carpenter drove up the hill past Chet McAusland's farm and came to the Law place beyond. The small home stood on the lower side of the road, shaded by two well-grown maples. An elm, larger than the maples, stood between the road and the barn.

The house itself was fast shut, with doors and windows boarded up; but with a hammer from his car he ripped off the boards on the door and forced his way inside. Within, there lay the dust of long desertion. Ancient pieces of furniture, some of them in hopeless disrepair, others capable of renovation, stood in the dark and shadowed rooms. Cobwebs filled the corners, and he heard the scuttling of mice behind the plastering.

From a leak in the roof, water had made its way into one of the upper rooms, weakened the plaster on the ceiling below, and molded the carpet which floored the main room on the first floor.

The house was not large. The front door opened into a small square hall, from which the stairwell rose. There was a sitting room on the right, in the southern end of the house; and on the left a small dining room gave access to pantries and kitchen. From the kitchen itself a door opened into the woodshed. Upstairs Mulock found two bedrooms, one in either end of the house, a narrow hall between. The only windows