

"A Rural Community," a story by Ruth Suckow

Ruth Suckow's writings remain in copyright. "A Rural Community" is presented here with the permission of her executor, Barbara Camamo. It may be downloaded and reproduced for nonprofit educational use only. Click for a finding aid to the [Ruth Suckow Papers](#) and further information.

The station agent at Walnut, and Mrs. Jake Dietz, who was expecting her brother's wife from Pomeroy, could not place the man who got off the "Clipper" at 10.10. He did not look just like a traveling man. He was stocky, moved briskly, had a slight mustache, wore a grey suit and a traveling-cap, and carried a bag pasted over with labels which Mrs. Dietz could not make out. She did not hear him ask the station agent where Luke Hockaday lived, or it would have come to her who he must be – that Ralph Chapin whom Luke Hockaday had "raised" and who was now a writer of some kind. But she was busy greeting her brother's wife and saying: "Well, you *got* here."

Ralph Chapin looked alertly about him, at the yellowand-brown depot with the row of willow trees and the pastures beyond, at the small business street, and the dingy brick Opera House and Masonic Hall. He thought: "*That* was here – *that* wasn't." The sharp white steeple of the little old Congregational Church where he had suffered every Sunday through one of Mr. Soper's half-hour prayers, no longer rose from the maple trees beyond the Opera House. It had burned, he remembered, and now there was a modern building of pressed brick with a square English tower. He noticed that the little street "across the tracks," where the old, hotel and livery barn stood, was falling into decay. One old man sat in the Windsor chair in front of the empty livery stable. Two or three automobiles passed. They were putting up two new pebble-dash bungalows on what used to be a vacant lot filled with red clover. Changes – even here! – You couldn't escape them.

The station agent had told him that Luke Hockaday was just at the edge of town – "Well, you know where the old Wood place is? Well, d'you know where Art Penhollow's pasture is – where the dump is? Well, d'you know where the cemetery is? Well, right across from that, where the road turns." He thought that he could find it. This was the first time that he had been in Walnut since Luke Hockaday had moved into town; it must be fifteen years or more.

He went along a street that had a sidewalk only part of the way. It was "across the tracks" in the old part of town. The first thing that he had noticed when the train pulled out was the stillness everywhere – only twitterings of birds and an occasional trill of song from a fence or tree. His mind, still filled with the rumblings and shriekings of cities, could hardly take it in. Was every one asleep? As he looked down the street, it pleased him to fancy that the whole town had fallen

asleep, like the Sleeping Beauty's castle, and was waiting for him to come back to waken it. Because this street had scarcely changed at all. It was almost the same!

He had been prepared for change. Flying about all over the civilized world as he did, change was the only thing he saw. His mind was full of a world rocking and falling and transforming itself into something undreamed of before – of new inventions, changing empires, a tottering social order, revolution. He had expected hardly to recognize the little old town. When he had come through Edinburgh, the county seat, where he and the Hockaday boys used to drive with their girls on County Fair day and the Fourth of July, he had seen it transformed from a country town into a miniature modern city. His eye had noticed at once the fine brick bank, the asphalt, the new cement bridge over the river. What he had not been prepared for was to find anything the same. He had not permitted himself to expect it. But of course Walnut was slow. It was a country community, made up almost wholly of retired farmers, and they either of English birth or English descent. It had always had something quaint and rustic about it. Besides, all hill and timber countries were behind the times; and Walnut was at the edge of that patch of rocky wooded country in the north-eastern corner of Iowa.

He looked from side to side – eager to recognize old landmarks, half amused when he discovered them, yet feeling all the time a tinge of sadness that was like the haunting of melancholy in this exquisite autumn day. This was the very street along which they used to drive when they came into town with a load or on Saturday nights. A wagon came along now – rattling slowly, an old man with a thick white beard hunched over on the seat, a bushel basket of apples and some gunny-sacks full of nuts jolting about in the back. That – everything he saw – teased him with elusive memories. This old house had always stood here – a one-story house of dingy brick, plain, with square small-paned windows, an old-timer. That big oak-tree at the corner! Here were vague reminders of the old days – plain white houses with almost a New England air, fallen leaves half raked upon the lawns, some late petunias bordering white house walls, a rockery, a bed of pansies and withered sweet alyssum edged with white clam shells from the Mississippi. Rope swings from the boughs of elm trees, a boy with bare feet who stared after him, pumps with tin cups dangling, even one of those queer old hammocks made of slats! It was like going back into his past, in a kind of dream. There were memories that he could almost touch – but not quite –

He looked beyond the houses, at the line of low hills on the south. He stood still – almost caught his breath at the sudden stab of emotion. With a strange impulse he took off his cap, held it crushed in his hand. There they were still – the old eternal hills! How well he knew them, better than anything in the world. The “lay of the land” – something in that to stir the deepest feeling in a man. Low rolling hills, fold after fold, smooth brown and autumnal, some ploughed to soft earth-colour, some set with corn stalks of pale tarnished gold. Along the farther ones, the woods lay like a colored cloud, brown, russet, red and purple-tinged. As he

walked on, the houses grew fewer, everything dwindled into pasture land. The feeling of autumn grew more poignant. There was a scent of dust in the stubble. The trees grew in scattered russet groups. One slender young cottonwood, yellow as a goldfinch and as lyric in its quality, stood in a meadow, alone. Not even spring beauty was so aching and so transient – like music fading away . Yet, under everything, something abiding and eternal.

He came to the very edge of town, almost to the woods through which Honey Creek ran. A house stood at the turn of the road. Of all things he had seen, it was the most autumnal. It stood plain and white against the depths of blue sky. Its trees were turning to pale yellow, its yard scattered with dry leaves. On the back porch yellow seed corn hung by the bleached husks to dry. Hickory nuts and walnuts were spread out on a piece of rag carpet. On the fence posts, orange pumpkins were set in blue granite kettles to ripen. The corn in the small field was in the shock. The smell of apples came from somewhere.

“This must be where they live!” He was sure of it, would have known it if he had not seen the dump across the road in the hollow, if he had not caught sight of the black wrought-iron fence of the cemetery and the white tombstones among the somber evergreens.

He went up to it, past the shed and a chicken-house, to the side gate. He walked quickly, with a smile of anticipation in his eyes and ready to come out upon his lips. An old man was just coming out of the barn along the two planks to the back door. He was big but crippled with rheumatism. He wore a blue shirt, a vest with a brown sateen back, and grey woolen socks. He had a handsome old face that must have been romantic in its youth, with a wave of snow-white hair, a high color, a big white moustache and small brown eyes. He regarded the stranger with the wariness of a country man. It was Luke Hockaday.

“Well, father – good day to you!” Ralph Chapin called. His teeth glittering under his small light moustache. He held out his hand.

The old man took it doubtfully.

“Don’t you know me? Don't you know Ralph?”

Luke Hockaday leaned forward and stared at him. “Well, I believe it is! It’s Ralph, for a fact. Ma, come here!”

An old woman came to the door whom, in spite of all the years’ change, Ralph Chapin knew for the woman he had called mother. “Who’s this, ma?” the old man said. She looked at one and then the other, as if she feared some kind of trap. Recognition began to dawn slowly in her face as the man kept on smiling at her. “It’s Ralph! Sure it is!” They all laughed exultantly. She held out her arms. He

came into them and stood there a long moment patting her stooped back and trying to swallow down any tears before they should come up and dim his eyes.

He had never dreamed that he would be so moved – or that they still cared so much after all these years. He knew that this would be one of those moments that would always stay with him – with these two old people here, the white house and the blue sky, the light autumn rustling of the trees, the scent of dust and apples.

They went into the house all talking. Luke carried Ralph's bag into the bedroom, and the old lady took his cap from him and laid it carefully upon the white bedspread. All the time, Ralph was telling them in his rapid, easy, practiced way, in his slightly harsh but attractive voice, the circumstances of his coming, and they were repeating and explaining what he said to each other. "Why, yes, didn't ye hear what he just got done saying, ma?" "That's just what he's been trying to tell you, pa, if you'd ever listen." But as he kept glancing about with his swift trained observation, he was feeling a sense of disappointment.

It was strange, wrong somehow, to have them here. After all, nothing remained the same in this world, in spite of the deep familiarity of those hills. They ought to have been in the parlor of the old farm-house that he remembered so well. It was one of those rock houses that are still found here and there near the Mississippi. It had deep windows, a wainscoting painted light brown, and beside the door a cupboard like the wainscoting. Whenever he thought of it, he could see Mother Hockaday opening that cupboard where she kept her glasses, toothpicks, her few letters, and a striped paper bag of cinnamon sticks in a tall glass. And he could fancy himself – he must have done it some time – standing in the yard where some yellow snap-dragons sent from England had run wild, in the sunshine, looking at the deep woods across the road.

He sat back smiling at the two old people while they went over and over the circumstances of the meeting. "Why, I didn't know no more who 'twas when I seen him opening that gate," Father Hockaday said. "Says he: 'Good day to ye, father.' Well, I knew 'twasn't any of the boys, but I couldn't figure out who't could be, then. Then says he: 'Don't ye know Ralph?' Ralph – well, I see that's who 'twas." "I knew him right off. Sure I did," the old lady declared. "No, ma, you didn't know him no more'n I did." "Sure I did." Ralph laughed delightedly. Suddenly he recognized their old familiar way of speech and he was at home again. Mother Hockaday's reassuring "Sure," and old Luke so slow, so deliberate, with a flavor of rural England in his tone. It was the way that he remembered old Grandma and Grandpa Hockaday talking, except that they had been completely English. In its different way it struck a note of memory as deep as that which the sight of the hills had touched – but homely, intimate, that brought a smile to his lips. Again it moved him, and astonished him.

“Why, do I look so much the same, mother?” he asked rallying. He did not think that he did.

“Sure you do,” she replied. “Oh, you dress different and talk different and got that little *mustache*, but then your voice is just the same, and the way you look out of your eyes – I’d know ye anywhere. That quick way, taking a body right up on everything. The rest of the boys was always more slow, like pa and me. Sure.”

He laughed, but he was not exactly pleased. He thought himself entirely transformed from that little raw country boy. He had studied, worked, traveled. He had thought there was not a trace of his old self left. He had been feeling all the time how remote he was from them, what a long way he had come. He had been an orphan whom Luke and Sarah Hockaday had “taken to raise.” They were the only parents he had ever known. They had been kind to him, but they had boys and girls of their own and he had always remembered that after all he was not one of theirs. That was partly what had sent him out into the world while the rest had stayed close to the old house, that and his eager restless temperament. He had lived with them on the farm until he was sixteen, when he had gone to work his way through a little Methodist academy a few stations away at Wesley, and then through the State University. Then he had gone into newspaper work in Chicago, and just once, at the time of Jack Hockaday’s wedding, he had come back to the farm. He always wrote to the two old people on Christmas Day and sent them a check. Now he was a writer, doing special articles for the big dailies and the magazines. He had been to half the cities of the globe, was in touch with all that was going on in the world, with every “movement.” He was just back from a flying trip to the capitals of the new Middle European states, where he had interviewed the leaders of numberless political factions. Before that he had investigated the Steel question, and before that had been a special correspondent at the war and the Peace Conference. He was going on now to do an article for *Hunter’s* on “Our New South.” His life was a series of flashing journeys, a kind of animated weekly. He thought of himself as a man without a home, or rather as a man capable of making a home in any cafe where he might chance to find a cosy seat. But somehow, after being so long in far-off countries, through such dangers, and after an illness that he had had in Prague, something had urged him to see this little town again and the two old people whom he had always called mother and father. A sudden realization had come that they would not be here for ever. He had come on from Chicago before he went South. It was not far. He might have come long ago.

But now as he said: “Now, mother, sit back and let *me* take a look at *you*,” he could see that she was not so different, after all. At once she began to look familiar to him. She had not changed so much as simply aged. That small head of hers, with something peculiarly sweet even in the cut of the features and structure of the bones, with the eyes set in deep hollows, and the hair of yellowed silver parted in the middle and rippling across the low square forehead. Only, the face was wrinkled, and the loss of teeth had spoiled the sweet curves of the thin

lips, had brought up the little chin and sunk in the mouth. But, most certainly, still Mother Hockaday, and the Sarah Wood whose picture, with curls and a feather, he and Hay used to admire so in the old album.

She looked at him timidly. "I'm an old woman, Ralph." She had always been proud of her pretty face.

"Pshaw, mother, not so old. Still that same pretty curly hair ."

"Oh, but just see how white it is, Ralph. Not so white as pa's is, though, even now."

"No, but I got my teeth. Ma's lost hers."

"Yes, and losing teeth ages a body awful. Oh, we're both getting old, pa and me. But then it's natural for folks to get old. They all have to. Sure they do."

"We all follow the same path. The path of life," the old man said impressively.

Ralph stirred slightly. His brows arched a little. He wondered if Luke was still such a devout old codger, and smiled to himself.

But the conversation did not become emotional, after all, as he had half comically feared, remembering Luke's way. Luke Hockaday was a combination of close canny farmer, generous neighbor, and devout churchman, absorbed in his family relations, of an almost profound simplicity. He loved to talk over the ways of God and the lives of his children. His small brown eyes would moisten. But now the old lady gave him no chance. She made little signs to him, to which he answered: "What ye want, anyway, ma?" and finally she contrived to let him know that he was to kill a chicken and to go to town for her. He put on his wide-brimmed black felt hat, and Ralph, smiling to himself, watched him go hobbling off obediently, staring at the piece of yellow paper on which were written all the things which he was to buy in town and half of which he would come back without, even so. They were going to kill the fatted calf.

"Well, now Ralph, I'll leave ye to yourself, a bit," Mother Hockaday said a little formally. "But just make yourself at home. You *are* at home. Sure you are!"

She was going out to the kitchen. "But can't I come out with you, mother?" he asked lightly. "Tie an apron on me and set me to work. It isn't every day you have a big boy to run errands for you."

She looked horrified. He remembered now that no male Hockaday had ever invaded the kitchen except to fill the wood box and empty the slops. That was the English of it. "Oh, no, my dear. I wouldn't have you coming out there to work. I'm used to gettin' the meals, you know. Sit down and read, or walk around the place.

You know what ye likes to do best. I'll just get us a little something to eat. 'Twon't be much, not in any style like ye gets in it in the cities –"

"No, I'm sure it won't be as I get in the cities," he interrupted. "Not if father carries out his designs on that chicken."

"We ain't got many good birds now," she said apologetically. "Pa, he thought the chickens was too much for me. Addie – that's Jack's wife – has got a hundred and fifty young birds – think of that, Ralph! My, it's nice when they all comes clucking around you when ye goes out with the feed! I likes chickens. I misses what I had on the farm. – Make yourself at home, now, Ralph. If there's anything ye'd like and ye don't see, ask me for it. Sure. That's what ye want to do."

She went into the kitchen and he looked after her, smiling fondly.

Left to himself, he wandered softly about a little at first, as one does in a strange house, touching this and that, glancing at the pictures and at the plants in the front window. Then he sat down by the table and picked up a paper that lay there. *The Home Friend!* He threw back his head and laughed noiselessly. To think they were still taking that – a ridiculous old sheet with farm items and blood-and-thunder serials that they had subscribed for, God knows why, as long as he could remember. He could see Mother Hockaday putting on her glasses, sitting down by the lamp on the dining-room table, while the June bugs beat against the ceiling, and saying: "Now Jack" (or "May," or "Dollie," or "Eddie"), "can't ye go away awhile and quit pestering and let ma read *The Home Friend?*" And they never could. He did not believe the poor woman had ever yet finished a serial! He looked down on the lower shelf for more plunder. The stereoscope! Verily, it was. With the very same views – Westminster Abbey, Mont Blanc, Unter den Linden, the Paris Opera House, the Arnold Arboretum, Forest Hills, Massachusetts, with the azaleas tinted a hideous pink and the leaves a ghastly green. The old album, too, with the dark leather covers stamped with gold. But he was too restless to look at that now, at all the pictures of Hockadays and Woods and "brother's wife's folks" and "cousins in York State." He wandered about noiselessly on an exploring expedition into the past, everything bringing up memories, acutely familiar, homely, humorous, yet always with that little ache of sadness. The combination desk and bookcase (a new acquisition, evidently, when they had moved into town), but on every shelf a doily, and on the doilies Mother Hockaday's treasures – colored sand in a glass arranged in the form of a wreath of flowers from the "Picture Rocks" by the Mississippi, a blue plate and tea-pot from England, a pink shell, some grey Spanish moss that Ed Woods had sent up from Florida, an agate – oh, all those things! And on top of the bookcase the stuffed owl that Uncle Pete Hockaday had shot in the timber. A photograph, of the year 1902, pasted on a grey card – a family reunion at the farm. He could make most of them out in the group standing awkwardly in front of the old rock house – mother, father, May and Dollie in those hideous collars and berthas and crimps, Jack, Ed, Will, and their wives, numerous children held firmly in front of

parents, Uncle Ben Hockaday in his suspenders. And there were other pictures – Grandpa and Grandma Hockaday framed in black walnut, Dollie at four with bangs and fair hanging hair and striped stockings, Jack’s and Addie’s wedding picture, Ed’s and Girlie’s wedding picture (Ed had curled his moustache on the curling-iron!), Dollie’s and Fred’s wedding picture, Dollie in her “graduation dress,” holding a rolled diploma, the class of 1898, “Walnut H. S.,” grandchildren, their graduation and wedding pictures – if time didn’t fly! And yet what a tremendous sense of continuation – that first old couple and a child, and then another couple and another child, and another couple and another child, and another couple – nothing new, after all, but endless, slightly varied repetitions. The same baby features appeared over and over again. He was completely absorbed when Mother Hockaday called to him from the door: “Ralph, would ye like to wash your hands before we set down?”

He jumped.

"What ye found there? Oh, photographs!" And as he stood smiling, blinking a little as if he had come out of a dream, she went on gravely to point out and explain each one: "That's Dollie's and Fred's girl Bernadine. I guess ye never seen her. That's Uncle Ben Hockaday's son's wife's sister – she's married now. That's May's youngest boy" – until Father Hockaday called out: "Ma, are ye goin' to let all the victuals get cold?"

He followed her out to the dining-room. As they sat down he noted the large window full of plants, and saw that although the table and chairs were not those they had used on the farm, he remembered many of the dishes and the starched white company table-cloth. He remembered that awkward moment when they first sat down and did not know whether to start eating or to bow their heads, until Father Hockaday began in his slow devout voice: "Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for all these Thy manifold good gifts to us," and he ducked his head hastily and looked as if he had expected it; and the awkward moment again after the blessing was over, and they all sat there, just before some one started passing things. And he knew the food! The platter of fried chicken, the mashed potatoes with the butter making a little golden hollow, the awkward bowl of gravy, the big slices of good home-made Iowa bread, the cucumber pickles, sweet pickles, beet pickles, red jelly, honey, corn relish, in a succession of little glass dishes that kept him so busy passing he hardly knew when to eat. "Now, there ain't much, Ralph, but what there is you're dearly welcome to." "Help yourself, Ralph. Make out a meal" "We're plain, ma and me. *You* know that. But I guess we can manage to get ye fed." "Take it all, Ralph, there's more in the kitchen." Of course the table should have been surrounded by children. Still, the feeling was the same. Cool autumn sunshine came in through the window across the red glass pickle dish, and there was a faint odor from the plants.

"If I'd just known ye's coming, I'd sent out for some of the children to come in," Mother Hockaday said. "May, she's got some of Hank's folks there right now, but

Dollie, she might have come in, and Jack, and Eddie – why didn't we telephone 'em, pa?"

"Oh, but, mother," Ralph said hastily, "I wouldn't have you go to so much work."

"Oh, I'm used to cooking for a big raft of folks. Sure I am," she said easily. "I can still get up a meal for 'em if I *am* getting old."

"Every Sunday we're together," Father Hockaday said. "Every Sunday I got my girls and boys about me as if we's still all living together on the farm. Children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren all together."

"Well, it's nice. It's a comfort for us. Sure it is. That's what I say. Help yourself to the pickles, Ralph. Maybe you'd like this kind better. – But what'd the children say if they knew Ralph was here, pa?" she continued. "What'd Jack say, d'ye s'pose? Ralph, ye better call Jack up after dinner. See what he says!"

"I'll do that," Ralph answered heartily.

"What d'ye s'pose Jack'll say? What'd *May* say, pa?"

She was still talking of that when they had all finished eating and she had come into the parlor after washing the dishes. She had brushed her rippling hair, and put on a thin dress of figured lawn, with a ruffle around the bottom of the skirt, and a black ribbon about her waist. She stood listening delightedly while Ralph rang four long and a short for Jack on the old-fashioned telephone.

"Hello! Jack Hockaday speaking? – Know who this is, Jack? You *don't*? – Well, do remember a certain brother of yours – Yes, it is. It most assuredly is Ralph – yes." ("Bet he's surprised – ain't he?" Mother Hockaday cried gleefully.) "Wish I could, old fellow, but I'm here on a flying trip, you might say. – You do that. I'd like to see the other boys, too."

"Jack coming in?" Mother Hockaday asked delightedly

"Yes, coming in to-night after milking."

"I knew he would. Sure, they all will. They'll all want to see Ralph."

Ralph was touched at the delight with which Jack had greeted him. And Jack and his wife were coming in, and were going to stop for Fred and Dollie, and send word to Ed and Will and May. Suddenly he found himself anxious to see them all. Why, he would have thought that the younger ones, like Ed and Dollie, would have forgotten him by this time!

"You ought to make us a real visit, Ralph," Mother Hockaday said anxiously. "Jack'll want ye to go out there. See the old place. Jack's always thought so much of you. He still talks about "What he and Ralph used to do."

He would have liked to see the old farm. He had supposed that to spend a few hours here, see the two old people once more, would have been enough for him. But he answered with regret: "Mother, I surely wish that I could." He went on to explain to her troubled uncomprehending eyes about an appointment in Louisville for Thursday, another in Birmingham. She did not see why he could not stay longer. He hardly saw why himself.

"Well, I *wish* ye could stay," she repeated. "You know we're gettin' old, pa and me."

Father Hockaday settled himself in his chair and took off his shoes again, now that the superficial strangeness of Ralph's clothes and manner had worn off. "So ye're a great traveler, Ralph," he began. "Ye been across the water and to foreign lands."

"Why, yes, father!" Ralph gave a flashing smile. "But what's that? You came over from England yourself. You've been a traveler. Mother, too."

"Yes," the old lady said vaguely. "Pa and ma did. Me, too, only I was so little then. But I don't like to have ye so far away, Ralph. Now, we're gettin' old, pa and me, it's a comfort for us to have our children all living round us. Jack, he's on the old place, and Eddie where Uncle Abel Wood used to live. May, she's the farthest, out of Edinburgh. If you got to be in the city, why don't ye settle in Chicago, Ralph? That wouldn't be so bad. Then we could see ye often."

"Oh, I can't settle yet, mother," he answered lightly. "Too many places to go. Too much to do."

"Not ready to settle, Ralph? Well, when ye goin' to be? You're over forty, ain't ye? Sure ye are."

"Oh, forty's young nowadays, mother."

"Ye ought to settle, Ralph," Father Hockaday said. "It ain't right, the way you're living. It's often come to me, it ain't right. Here's all my boys, each one with his good wife and his home and his children growing up around him – only Ralph, now. And I often think, I wish ye could find a woman for ye, Ralph. Every man ought to have a helpmate. Look at ma and me. What'd either of our lives been alone?"

"It's so lonesome for you, my dear," the old lady said commiseratingly.

The light smile with which Ralph had been listening at first had gradually become set and painful on his lips. He felt the sudden shock of a different point of view. He had been easily sure of the superiority of his life – but how could he hope to explain it to them? The moving with world events, the meeting with the choice of the earth, the advantages of freedom, the sharp spur of competition, the eager gnawing need of work, the place that he had won for himself? It seemed to be melting away from him. He was all at once conscious of a void in the very center of his being. It unsettled him, it made him feel as if he were swimming in thin air. It was hard for him to answer, to turn the talk aside.

Father Hockaday said slyly: “But it’s too late for you to get your old girl, Ralph. Yes, while ye’s away, another man stepped in. Oh, she’s a lovely woman, Dora is. I couldn’t have asked better than to have had ye marry Dora.”

“Yes, but he can’t have Dora, now, pa,” Mother Hockaday put in. “And she ain’t just the kind he’d want any more. Ralph’d want a more stylish kind of woman, like him.” Ralph laughed. “Yes, you find ye one, Ralph,” she persisted. “Ain’t you met some woman you’d like, in some of those places where ye been? Ye’ve been around enough.”

“Perhaps I haven’t found any who’d like me.”

“Don’t tell me that, my dear,” she answered proudly. He patted her hand.

“He’d never find a better woman than Dora Cross,” old Luke repeated. “A good mother, and a good church worker, and a good housekeeper. He ought never to have let her go.”

“Yes, but, pa, Ralph didn’t want to settle here. He wanted to see the world a little.”

“Well, now he’s seen it, ain’t he? Now it’s time for him to settle and make a home for himself, like all men does.”

Ralph did not reply. After a silence – “Dora Cross!” he exclaimed, half humorously. “I haven’t thought of her for years. Whom’d she marry, father?”

“Why, this Tom Stonecipher. Ain’t ye never heard?”

“Never!” He laughed softly.

“There’s where ye lost a good woman, Ralph.”

“Wish ye could see Dora, Ralph –”

"Oh, no, mother! Spare me that." He held up his hand. That was where he *would* see changes, in his boyhood sweetheart. He much preferred to keep her as he saw her now, a round face and fair hair surrounded by a kind of mist.

Old Luke was still harping on the same subject. "Melie Penhollow's still single, Ralph. Ye might get her."

"Melie Penhollow! What's Ralph want of *her*?"

"Oh, now, Melie ain't such a bad woman. If she didn't have that kind o' squint-like –"

"Of course she ain't a bad woman. Melie's a nice girl. But *Ralph* don't want no one like Melie."

"Grace Smith– she's a nice woman, now. I'd like to see Grace get a husband."

"You let Ralph pick out his own wife, pa. He knows who he wants better'n you do, I guess."

"Well, why don't he do it, then?" the old man grumbled. "He's had time enough. I just thought I'd help him out a little."

"Thanks, father! Of course you did." Ralph laughed, but he felt uncomfortable.

A wife, a home, and a child – these things continued under all the seeming revolution in the lives of men. Eagerness and striving after other things – and then a sense of emptiness, and back to the old things again. Even he himself. He might come back to them.

Mother Hockaday brought out an immense scrap-book in which, among long obituaries and accounts of weddings from the *Walnut Echo*, she finally found an ancient picture of Ralph, in a high collar and bow tie, from a newspaper, and even some of his articles which other people had discovered for her in magazines.

"Why, mother, I didn't know you'd care for all these things!" he exclaimed.

She put her hand on his knee and looked at him. "Why, Ralph, didn't I bring ye up? Ain't you one of my boys? Sure you are."

He sat back smiling and scarcely trusting himself to speak. He felt, to his wonder, a kind of resurrection of his boyhood self.

He was soon talking again, in his rapid and vivid way, trying to give them some faint ghost of a notion of all the things that he had seen and done. They listened

with ingenuous delight. Several times Mother Hockaday laid her hand on his knee and stopped him while she turned to the old man to exclaim: "Don't that sound like Ralph, now, pa?"

"Does it?" Ralph asked, laughing a little. "Was I always such a talker, mother?"

"You was always a fine talker," she said fondly. "Better'n any of the boys. He was, wasn't he, pa?"

"He talked a little too much, ma, when you'd set him at the churn." They all laughed. "And he was awful hard to keep quiet in church. While the minister was praying, he'd twist, and *he'd* wiggle, and then he'd get all the rest of the boys to wigglin', and then he'd sneeze –"

Ralph laughed hilariously, recognizing the picture. But the old lady would not laugh at him. "Well, they was awful long, pa, Mr. Soper's prayers always was. I don't really know that I blamed the boy. Mr. Soper was a good man and a lovely preacher, but his prayers was long, that I've always said."

"Mother always sticks up for her boys."

"Sure I do, Ralph, sure I do."

But while he talked, although it soothed some dissatisfaction of his to see that they were struck with naive admiration of his having seen so many places, he could see that they did not really take it in. To their minds, it was Will and Ed and Jack who had achieved success. They admired Ralph, and yet they could not understand – how he lived, why he had no family, just what he was doing anyhow. He tried to give them some idea of what was going on in the world. But although they would exclaim: "Yes, things are changing! Nothing ever stays the same in this world," they said it comfortably, like repeating some old axiom, not as if they grasped it at all. Once the old man said: "Yes, they talk about changin' everything, changin' everything. All this new machinery and all. But far as I see, no one's yet found the way to make the corn grow any way but from first planting the seed, and then it gettin' watered by the rains and het by the sun, tosselin' out and bein' cut. And folks stays about the same." The old lady had always been the brighter of the two. Her eyes were a little troubled as she tried to comprehend it all. But what pleased both of them was when they could catch some phrase or gesture that reminded them of the boy Ralph. Then they would exclaim in delight: "Didn't that sound like Ralph? Didn't it now?" And they would go on to relate, minutely, characteristics of his that he would have supposed no human being would have cared to remember – how he had always wanted to use that pink marbled soap to wash with, how he would never wear a certain kind of hat that all the other boys wore, how he would not take cream in his coffee. Human relationships were what they understood, the things to which they clung.

Gradually, in spite of this amusement and pleasure at arousing their amazement, he grew quiet, and soon ceased talking altogether. These things of which he spoke seemed, even to him, far away. The autumn air, cool and sunny, came in through the open door. He could look out and see, along the crest of the upland pasture, oaks with blood-red patches through which the sun shone. Sometimes a rooster crowed, sometimes a flock of birds whirred up from the tree outside. Years dropped away, He began to realize in his secret mind a kind of sameness under everything. He imagined himself in the midst of whirling water suddenly touching bed rock and finding it just about what it had always been.

They began to talk to him, to tell him all about Will and Jack and Eddie and May and Dollie; and about the boys and girls whom he had known in school – how this one had married such a one, and this one had died, and this one moved into town. He could see that all the while they were still puzzling themselves as to why *he* had never married, and feeling, in spite of their pride in his accomplishments, a kind of sorrow that they could not see *him*, like the other boys, settled. He began to feel even a kind of dissatisfaction with himself, to think with distaste of the journey he must take that night, vaguely to wish that, in all the world, there was something to which he could feel himself so attached as they were to these hills.

The old man wandered off after a time, lay down on the lounge in the dining-room, and went to sleep.

"Pa's gettin' to sleep so much," the old lady complained.

"I'm real ashamed of him in church. Oh, we've got a lovely minister now, Ralph! I wish ye could hear him." And then she said: "I'm going over to the cemetery, my dear. Wouldn't ye like to come along? Grandpa and Grandma's there now, ye know, pa's folks and mine. Yes, do. Put on your cap. We'll go over there together and let pa have his nap."

She put on her little black straw hat and he took his traveling cap in his hand. He loitered about the yard while she picked some of the late asters to take with her, and showed him just where she had had all her summer flowers, lamenting that he had come too late to see the four-o'clocks and moss roses and sweet peas. Then they went along the road together, Ralph checking his brisk walk to suit her slow step.

He opened the small iron gate of the cemetery for her. The big gate for vehicles, with its imposing scroll top, was locked with a chain. He followed her into the quiet place. The grass was still a little green. The tall evergreens stood in a somber dusk, and the little breeze, that was so sunny and fresh outside, made a different sound in their big creaking boughs. Still, it was a pleasant place, with the low brown hills and pastures beyond, the autumn woods, and the little town off at the west. Some of the trees were noisy with birds. As he followed Mother

Hockaday past the Soldiers' Monument, he noted the familiar names on the stones – Wade, Wood, Penhollow, Davies, Stonecipher, Reed. Since he had been here, one generation had slowly and almost imperceptibly passed, had taken up its abode in this quiet place not very far from the old homes. That had its beauty.

The Hockaday lot was in a corner of the cemetery. He pleased Mother Hockaday by admiring the plain stone of polished granite with a kind of scroll at the top, instead of the lofty monument of the Reeds. He stood watching her. These rites had long been strange to him. She plucked off some withered flowers on the mound with the small headstone "Mother," and he filled for her at the pump a glass that had tipped over and that had a faint greenish stain and odor of wilted flowers. She did not seem sad, only calm and cherishing, as when she went about her household tasks. He saw that the asters were not for Grandma and Grandpa but for a little grave that he had quite forgotten – of the little two-year-old Agnes who had died of diphtheria nearly forty years ago. The little old-fashioned white slab, on which the letters were faint and weather-worn, slanted back over the small sunken mound.

"Some of those autumn leaves would look nice, wouldn't they, Ralph?" the old lady said. "You know you can paraffin them. If we had time we'd go into the woods and get some, wouldn't we? I always think the hard maples are so lovely."

She was not through yet. She had kept some of the pink asters for another small grave. A white log, roughly cut, on which a lamb was lying, guarded it. ..

"Adelaide Mellon," he read softly. "Why, I knew her, didn't I, mother? I remember when she died."

"Sure you did. Mrs. Mellon's been gone a good while, Ralph, but I promised her when she lay sick I'd keep little Adelaide's grave just like she'd always kept it herself. She was a lovely woman, Mrs. Mellon was. These plants look so kind o' spindling."

Ralph wandered off a little way. A faint smile was on his lips, less brilliant and more thoughtful than usually was there. He looked past the stones to the russet woods, letting the breeze stir his hair.

Mother Hockaday came and laid her hand on his arm. "What ye thinkin' about, my dear?"

He turned about: "That this wouldn't be such a bad place to sleep in, some day," he answered half whimsically.

She replied quite seriously. "So ye can, my dear, but I hope it won't be for a long while yet. You're one of us, sure you are."

He arched his brows. He did not know whether or not there was anything serious in what he had said. In his theory, the cast-off body mattered nothing. "Oh, I fly about so much, mother, no telling where I'll end up. China or Van Diemen's Land _"

She was perturbed. "Don't say that, Ralph. No, I don't like to think of you off by yourself somewhere."

"Let me carry your basket, mother," he urged with sudden vivacity.

The old man was just coming out to the yard to look for them when they reached home. The day was going fast. The trees threw long shadows. They had supper, and after that the children drove in.

They came in Fords instead of the old buggies, but the Fords were filled just as the buggies had been with the shy staring eyes of children. May had not been able to get in, but all the rest had come. They seemed to make a great noise when they all came tramping into the house. They greeted Ralph with bashful loudness.

He was astounded at the rustic look of these fosterbrothers, which seemed to him more rural, somehow, than that of other Middle-western farmers. They were prosperous, he knew, and he had expected them to be what is called "up-and-doing," to have left the old people far behind. All of the boys except Will, who was the oldest, had thick untrimmed shocks of hair that curled about their ears and reddened necks, and Will had a patriarchal beard. Their calm eyes, slow speech, their clumsy shoes, and rosy cheeks – they were astonishingly like the English yokels whom he had seen about the doors of thatch-roofed cottages. So many of the old characteristics had survived. Only Dollie had the rippling hair and sweetly cut features of her mother, and was, in spite of her country dress and six children, a pretty woman. But children! What families they all had! Will with eleven and Jack with eight! It seemed to him that endless relays of them were being herded shyly up to "see Uncle Ralph."

They were all a little bashful with Ralph, even Jack, his old chum; and he had a feeling of helpless dismay at the gulf which seemed to lie between him and them. He felt again a man of the world, not the old persistent self that he had been recapturing that afternoon with the old people. He was introduced solemnly to the wives and to Dollie's husband, all of whom remembered him so well that he had to pretend also to recall them. "Sure – Girlie Wade, don't you remember her?" They pumped his hand, Will owlishly, almost Biblically solemn, the others with abrupt awkward meaningless laughs. They settled down in the parlor and an agonized hush held them (broken by low commands and whispers to the children) until Mother Hockaday set them going with her repetitions of how glad she was that they could come in to see Ralph, and how sorry that May couldn't

come. They began to talk shyly to him and he to answer with a somewhat exaggerated vivacity to cover his dismay.

They asked about what he had been doing “all this time,” and where he had been, saying: “That so?” and “Listen to that,” laughed loudly at whatever he told them that seemed odd or (to them) fanciful, and yet with a kind of blankness in their eyes that rather disconcerted him. He did not know that they were hoarding up all that he said to bring out, and to mull over, endlessly. But still it was an effort, they were uncomfortable, until they fell into the old observations and repetitions and human discussions again. Ralph sat back listening.

“You going to have woodchoppers again this year, Dollie?”

“Oh, I guess so. Fred, he wants to thin out them willows down near the creek.”

“Haul ‘em into town, Fred. Willow makes good wood.”

“Naw, willow don’t. Maple does, now. Oak’s the best wood. They ain’t cuttin’ much oak now. Got it too thinned out. *She* don’t want the willow cut, even” – with a gesture of his thumb toward Dollie.

“No, I don’t. I never want to see any of the old trees go down. I don’t know, when they been there so long –”

“She keeps in the house where she can’t hear them fall.”

“Sure she does. I don’t blame her. That’s what I always done when pa got to wood-chopping. I likes the trees.”

“Well, frost’s holding off a good while.”

“Yes, the hard maples ain’t even red.”

“Yes, but we’ll have it. We’ll have frost within a week and a frost to kill. Whenever we have a spell of real warm weather like this ‘long about the first of October it’s always followed by a hard frost. I ain’t never known it to fail.”

“Well, now, about the year 1902, we had an October like this and frost never come until the nineteenth of November.”

“Well, we’ll have frost. You see.”

“Ed Robi’son”’s broke his arm, d’you know that? Broke it crankin’ his car. The handle flew back on him and hit him right here above the elbow.”

"Sure! I always knew he'd do that some time. He always took hold of it kind o' back-handed like. I told him so. I says: 'Ed, that'll fly back on you some day and break your arm for you.' No! He knew what he was doin'. Can't never tell a Robi'son nothing."

Ralph sat back and listened, his eyes now bright, yet full of dreamy interest. His dismay slowly wore off. The talk seemed to bring him certain country things – the bitter sappy smell of a new-felled tree, the scent of nuts in autumn woods, the tangy smell of cider in the October sun, the dry ghostly crackle of pale-gold corn stalks left standing in the fields. He began to feel a certain something about his fosterbrothers that satisfied him, that curiously pleased some primitive depth in him. He began to be glad of their slow voices, their odd turns of speech, their rustic air. These things suggested the deep stabilities of country life – the slow inevitable progression of the seasons, the nearness to earth and sky and weather, the unchanging processes of birth and death, the going of the birds in the fall and their sure return in the spring, the coming, night after night, of the familiar stars to the wide country sky.

Somehow it pleased him now to think of how deeply rooted they were. It gave him, confirmed wanderer as he was, "something to tie to." No wonder that they were so little changed. After all, where had they been? Back and forth over the same old roads, bringing their crops into Walnut. To Edinburgh to the County Fair or to the Chautauqua on the night when Krill's Band played; and when they had real shopping to do, perhaps as far as Dubuque. They might have gone farther but they had little desire. Other places to them were a kind of dream. They laughed at them indulgently. Perhaps some day, when all the children were grown and they in turn had left the farm, they might "take a trip." But it would be without pleasure, largely under protest, and they would come home sooner than they had planned. "Pa, he got sick of it. Ma, she didn't want to stay no longer." People, even in Edinburgh, traveled widely now. But here they stayed close to their own soil.

The first strangeness had quite worn off. Ralph caught looks, characteristics, of the boys and girls he had known. They did the same with him. Jack, his old comrade, who had at first seemed the strangest, was now the most familiar. Under his red hardened skin his features had remained curiously unchanged. There was a kind of shy friendliness in Jack's eyes under that shock of hair just as when they were children, not speaking to each other, perhaps, when there were other people present, but always conscious of the secret bond between them. It was there still, something kindred, under all the difference. Still that something that he liked about Jack, that made him feel a little closer to him than to all the rest. That was perhaps the one friendship, incongruous as it seemed, which would never break. He would always have the feeling that Jack was there.

At half-past nine they began to gather the children together. The old people had already endured visible agonies of sleepiness. They all became solemn and

formal again, as they shook hands with Ralph and urged him to “Come and see us next time. Come when you can stay a little longer.” Jack stood beside him for a few minutes, awkwardly, before he cranked the Ford. “Well, Ralph, better come out to the old place again. Still a few crappies, I guess, in the creek.” “Thanks. I’ll do that, Jack.” “Yes, sure. Well –” Jack could not think of anything else to say. One of the children called: “Ain’t you going to crank her, pa?” “Well – I’ll say good-bye, Ralph,” he said then.

Ralph stood out on the lawn until even the sound of the cars was lost in the stillness of the country night. He looked up at a sky thick with stars. He heard the familiar sounds of the old people moving about in the house, going out to the kitchen, closing windows. Old Luke padded about in his stocking feet just as Grandpa Hockaday had always done. Finally Ralph went in.

His train left at eleven-thirty. Somehow he managed to overcome Mother Hockaday’s scruples against his being allowed to go to the station alone, at having no one to “see him off safely.” He could see that the old man was in an agony to get to bed. For the last hour he had been squirming in his chair, easing first one leg and then the other. Mother Hockaday kept saying: “I can’t think we’re doing right, Ralph, to let ye go off by yourself”; but he managed to take leave of them at the house.

Father Hockaday became impressively solemn. He held Ralph’s hand in a hard and yet feeble grip. Ralph returned the pressure, stirred at the feel of the rough aged skin. “Ralph, the Lord keep ye,” the old man said.

Ralph turned to Mother Hockaday. He took her silently in his arms. When he let her go, he could see tears in her eyes, but she followed him to the door smiling mistily.

“Well, Ralph, I hope ye have a good safe journey. And get some sleep on the way.”

“I will. Don’t worry. Good-bye, father. Good-bye, mother.”

He hurried off. They still stood in the lighted doorway. At the gate he looked back and made a gay gesture of good-bye.

Father Hockaday, who still had a great respect for trains, had insisted on getting him off in plenty of time. He walked very slowly. He did not look back at the old house, which showed a light now in the bedroom window, but he was conscious of it. Conscious of the old people whom he might never see again. Instead, he looked at the silent street, where never a light shone, where his heels rang out loudly. He looked at the thick strewing of stars on the night sky. The low line of hills was just visible, a patch of immovable darkness.

Only the agent was at the station. Ralph got his ticket, then went outdoors again and sat down on an empty baggage truck. He could hear the click of the telegraph inside. It sounded sharp and lonely. The air was chill outside, but it pleased him.

His lips were curved in a musing smile. Tomorrow, this little place would seem a million miles away – almost out of existence. But he was aware that since he had stepped off the train in the morning, the current of his thoughts had been changed. He felt steadied, deeply satisfied. He looked toward the dark pastures beyond the row of dusky willow trees. They widened slowly into the open country which lay silent, significant, motionless, immense, under the stars, with its sense of something abiding.

The train came in – huge, noisy, threatening in the silence. Ralph sprang expertly aboard. The familiar sense of travel engulfed him immediately. He had found his berth, arranged things swiftly, before the station of Walnut was left behind. He was alert, modern, a traveler again.

But all night long, as he lay half sleeping, swinging lightly with the motion of the train, he was conscious of that silent spreading country outside, over which changes passed like the clouds above the pastures; and it gave him a deep quietude.