

# **BEYOND THE FOOT OF THE HILL**

by Beth Slater Whitson

"She'll turn back at the foot of the hill," Pa Garner, watching from the sagging front steps, told himself; Mary was only trying to scare him. She wouldn't leave him after their thirty years together; she would stop at the foot of the hill, sit down by the roadside, maybe, for a little while to let her "mad spell" cool off; then she would come back and cook one of her good suppers on the old stove, and the trouble would all be settled, the new stove forgotten.

Ma Garner, far up the valley, was getting near, very near, the foot of the hill. Her black and white checked calico dress was becoming a sober gray in the distance, her tiny shawl a protection against the early autumn chill --was a sharp circle of black about her slightly stooped shoulders --a stoop which Pa Garner noted for the first time --and he suddenly remembered, too, the tired look on her face as she had gone out the gate. He wished she hadn't gone tramping off like that, trying to scare him --it was a full half mile to the hill. He had a good mind to hitch up Dolly to the old buggy and drive up there for her when she stopped. She was almost touching the foot of the hill now; she was just about where it began to slope and she ought to be stopping -- but she wasn't -- or she didn't seem to be; she appeared to be moving steadily onward. But it couldn't be!

Pa Garner drew an unsteady hand across his eyes. He was sure they were deceiving him, but when he looked again he knew better. Ma Garner was climbing the hill; she was slowly but surely mounting the steep road which led up and out of the valley.

Pa Garner stared after the drab, lonely figure, his mouth agape with astonishment. The first soft blur of twilight made it more and more indistinct as it toiled up the long hill. Then, suddenly it stood out sharply, silhouetted against the paling sky. It had reached the top; for a second it seemed to pause and waver, then Pa Garner saw it move slowly beyond his line of vision.

When the darkness had fallen, Pa Garner still sat dejected on the sagging steps. A cow lowed mournfully in the background; the soft whinny of a horse came at frequent intervals, and the plaintive bleat-bleat of lambs. But Pa Garner was blind and deaf to material sights and sounds. He had gone back thirty years. He was young again. Mary - -Ma Garner was young; they were starting out together --there were just two rooms then -- there were six now, tacked on one by one as the children had come and made it necessary. There were two children for each added room - or had been -- there were none now; one by one they had hurried away as fast as they grew up. Pa Garner had felt bitter towards them and towards the world because of their haste to go. Mary, he remembered, had never complained when the children went. "Let them go out and work for themselves," she had said when he stormed about them leaving just when they were getting big enough to work. Work had been his god -- work and money; his had been an itching, grasping palm since it had known the first feel of real money -- one thousand dollars, which had come to him from the sale of a clump of fine trees which had grown on the edge of the little place he had first bought.

Mary had timidly asked for a few dollars to buy a piece or two of better furniture for the poor little house, and he had refused her brusquely. The very next day he had bought an adjoining hundred acres, making the thousand dollars a first payment of ten. That was the beginning of pinching, scrimping years --years when they rose at three in the morning and worked until nine at night. He had driven those about him, but had not spared himself. In ten years he had finished paying for the hundred acres and another hundred besides. Money began to flow in a constant stream; the itching palm clutched the dollars and relinquished them grudgingly. Mary had begged for a new house, and he had snorted at the idea of putting good six per cent money in something that couldn't draw interest. Not while he lived, he told her, would he be such a fool.

He built a great barn and bought improved farming tools --but only bare necessities were purchased for the house --for Mary and the children.

When the children had all gone, more and more was added yearly to the saving fund, drawing compound interest. At forty-five Mary looked sixty, and he at fifty would have been taken for a man of sixty-five --and still he slaved, hoarding up the dollars, dimes, and nickels, until he had no idea how much stood to his credit in the little town bank three miles away.

Long since, Mary had stopped asking for anything, and had settled down into a sort of quiet acceptance of things as they were, so he had thought, until the day before, when, like the proverbial bolt from a blue sky, he had come back from town where he had gone to make a deposit, and found Ma Garner cooking supper on a new range.

He thought at first she had by some means drawn the money from his bank account to buy it, and his anger was something terrible to behold. But, finally, she admitted having received a hundred dollars from a long absent prosperous brother, and having bought the stove from an agent / paying him seventy-five of the hundred dollars for it. And without consulting him! Pa Garner had tramped back and forth across the small kitchen, abusing Ma Garner, and finally decided to send for the agent and make him take the stove back, and refund the money.

"If you do, I'll leave you," Ma Garner had said grimly, as she went on cooking supper, and he had sneered --yes, sneered and he had carried out his threat.

The agent had come and agreed to refund fifty dollars and take back the stove, which he finally did, after much raving from Pa Garner. The minute the agent had gone, he turned on Ma Garner and accused her of throwing away twenty-five dollars. "Women are not fit to handle money," he went on. "Give me the other twenty-five to take care of for you."

Ma Garner seemed not to have heard; she had gone into one of the bare little rooms, locking the door behind her; and when she had come out, she carried a small bundle and wore her sunbonnet and little black shawl. She had passed Pa Garner on the sagging steps. "I told you I'd leave you if you sent back the stove, and I'm going to John's," was all she said. Then she had gone down the little path, beaten hard by the footprints of years, and turned up the valley road that led over the hill, and he had sat on the steps waiting for her.

Pa Garner lived it all over that night -- the belief that she would come back growing fainter and fainter as the hours passed. He went in at last ruffling through the dark, and throwing himself across the hard bed without removing his clothes; sleep wouldn't come but Ma Garner's tired face kept coming before him, thin and lined, a look of fear in her faded blue eyes.

When the cold light of dawn stole into the curtainless room, Pa Garner lay staring at the bare walls, the old makeshift furniture, the faded rag-carpet for which he had grudgingly bought the warp -- it was worn and old; Mary had made it for the best room when Lucy had first grown up -- Lucy, who ran away and married her first beau. An old "what-knot", made of spools, stood in one corner -- Pa Garner remembered that Janie had made it -- Janie, their youngest; she, too, had left them early -- but not to be married she had run away to the wicked city, and he had forbidden her name to be mentioned in the house. He had not allowed himself to think of her in years, but now a mental picture of her flashed before him -- a picture of her in the fields, hoeing side by side with boys and hired men, her long brown braids balling almost to her knees. He gave a little groan.

"Gone! All -- all of them gone! Not one child left! Mary, gone!"

He got stiffly up and went slowly out to the little kitchen. There he made a fire in the old stove and set about cooking a bite of breakfast. The stove smoked, and he couldn't find any vessels to cook things in. The coffee pot had lost its handle; there was only one frying pan, and it had a great gap in one side. He thought of all the good tools in the barn, and wondered how Mary had ever cooked without anything to cook in or on. He had a feeling of nausea when he thought of the new stove, and when he carried the few things he had managed to cook and placed them on the old rickety home-made table with its ugly red oil-cloth which he had bought for service, he couldn't eat. Things crowded in on him. For the first time he saw how poor and mean was the house he existed in.

He pushed the food away untasted, and went out to feed and milk. Most of the well-to-do farmers had hired men to milk for them, but Mary had always done the milking. Pa Garner went about it awkwardly. There were four cows, and his hands ached before he finished. No wonder Mary had often been tired and cross when she came in from milking. He wondered what to do with the milk. Mary had churned it, and he had carried the butter to town and sold it, the money had gone into the savings fund. He finally decided to give the milk to the pigs; and, going back to the house, he wandered restlessly from room to room.

"Not fit for anything but to set on fire," he muttered at last. All of his neighbors had good houses -- and he had more money than any of them.

In the best room, which had been closed for years, he found an old yellowed household journal; it bore the date of twenty years before, and on the upturned page was the picture of a house -- a real house. He picked it up and carrying it over to the light, studied the picture earnestly. On the opposite page were photographs of furnished rooms -- the interior of the pictured house. It might be old-fashioned by now, he thought at last, noting the date, and Mary was the kind that would want the best or nothing -- the up-to-date range had shown him that.

Scales seemed to fall from Pa Garner's eyes. The household journal had the mark of small finger prints on the margin -- "Maybe Janie's," he thought. "Maybe the children wouldn't have been so anxious to leave him if he had done the right thing by them." Tears trickled down his cheeks for the first time since his mother died, when he was just a lad; a great wave of regret swept over him. "If he could only live it all over!"

Still carrying the old journal, he went out and sat on the steps, and looked up the valley -- the road Mary had gone. It lay white and peaceful in the morning sunlight; the fields on either side were thickly dotted with shocks of grains the straws were gold. It was a valley of plenty -- there was no sign of poverty save the house on whose sagging steps he sat. It was the only blot on the landscape. "Wasn't there some way -- was it too late?" A dim idea was struggling in his brain. He stood up at last, facing the make-shift house.

"If I could do all that," he said slowly, "if I could make it somethin' like the picture! We ain't so powerful old yet; maybe we could even find Janie. Maybe it wasn't too late!"

At the thought, a look of hope came over Pa Garner's face. He stood for a moment longer gazing at the sordid little house; then putting the household journal into his pocket, he went out and hitched up Dolly to the old buggy and drove away in the direction of the little town whose bank had been gathering in his money for years and years.

Ma Garner sat on the neat front porch at John's place. John was her first-born, and she had come to him for shelter; yet, so far she had not plucked up the courage to tell him of the trouble. She had just come visiting for a day or two, she had told Minnie, John's wife.

If the son and daughter suspected anything, they had hidden it carefully, and had welcomed her with open arms to their modest little house which seemed a palace to Ma Garner, compared to her own.

She had never spent a night with them before, and had been almost speechless with surprise that morning on seeing John bring in the milk.

"Does he milk for you all the time?" she asked Minnie when John had left the kitchen for a moment.

"Of course, he does," laughed Minnie. "Milking ain't a woman's job."

Ma Garner had closed her lips tightly. Not a woman's job and she had done it for thirty years!

Everything about the little house had proved interesting to her, in spite of trouble. She had baked pies in Minnie's shiny stove, and had made half a dozen trips to the tiny dining room to touch wistfully the snowy table cloth and the white dishes with the big band of pink rosebuds. How she had wanted things like that!

By accident, she had uncovered Minnie's sewing basket and been startled by some tiny garments, half finished. Her tears had fallen on them unconsciously, and Minnie, coming in just then, had cried, too, and put her head on Ma Garner's shoulder. "Ain't these sweet?" she said. "I'm just so happy I nearly burst with joy at times."

Ma Garner remembered the coarse little garments she had made when she knew John was coming; she remembered the long, hot summer before he came, when she had cooked, washed and ironed for Pa Garner and three hired men. It had not been a time of happiness to her, although she had loved her baby when he came. But she had not felt like bursting with joy--life had been too hard, she told Minnie so.

It was almost five o'clock, and since three, Ma Garner had sat on the porch in the big willow chair, rocking slowly and thinking. Tomorrow she would tell John. Today she would just rest; after thirty years of toil she was homeless and penniless.

She looked down at her rough shoes, the black and white checked dress --her best -- after thirty years of drudgery.

Suddenly she found herself wondering why she had bought the stove -- why she had wanted a stove like that in such a house, so out of keeping with the other belongings. She laughed outright -a queer mirthless laugh. How foolish she had been to rebel after thirty years of oppression, after the beset part of her life was gone; after she was too old to start over; after the children had left and there was no one to make a home for. What did it really matter whether she cooked on an old stove or a new one, since there was no one to see, no one to care? She suddenly decided to go back. She then thought of the twenty-five dollars -- the remainder of the hundred worried her for a moment then her face brightened.

"Minnie," she called, and Minnie came. Ma Garner put into her hand a crumpled wad of bills. "I want you to buy something you've wanted and couldn't have, with that," she said.

"But, Mother," protested Minnie, staring at the denomination of the bills in wonder.

"But nothing," returned Ma Garner calmly, "run along back in the house and think of something you want very much; I have no need of money for myself, and I just want to rest."

"I'll keep it until you do need it," Minnie said at last. Then she kissed Ma Garner softly on her silvering hair and went slowly away as she was bidden.

The shadows grew a little longer, and presently there was the light sound of wheels on the road. Pa Garner, seated in a shiny new buggy, drove up to the little gate. He hitched and came haltingly up the walk; then he saw Ma Garner in the big, comfortable rocker, and quickened his step.

"Mary," he called, and his voice had an odd boyish quality. "I've come to tell you we're going to have a new house. I've got men tearing down the old one this minute; we're going to have it just like you want it, and everything in it just as you like -"

He had reached the steps, and fumbled awkwardly with his hat when no answer came. "Mary, you just got to forgive me," he faltered, "I've been asleep all these years -- we got loads and loads of money -- we'll do anything you say -- buy anything you say buy; we'll go hunt for Janie -"

Minnie had come noiselessly on the porch.

Pa Garner had never set foot in the house before. He looked at Minnie apologetically.

"I've come after her and she won't speak to me. Help me to make her listen, child." His voice was piteous.

"Mary, he pleaded, moving closer to the figure in the rocker, "I'll give you half of everything I've got; yes, you can have it all, if you'll just come back and stay on with me -- all; I want is just you, Mary."

The shadows were deep on the porch. Minnie went quietly forward and laid a gentle hand on Ma Garner's shoulder.

"Please listen, Ma," she said. "Pa is sorry. He wants you -- he just never knew until now -"

"Until last night," said Pa Garner.

"You're going to have everything you've wanted -- a house and everything to go in it -- Pa says so. He -"

She broke off, and leaning down, looked closely at the face in the shadows; she uttered a little cry.

"Pa Garner! Pa Garner!" She said frightenedly.

In an instant Pa Garner was beside her. "Mary!" He cried. "You can have everything you've ever wanted -- speak to me!"

But the big rocker held only a prematurely old and hopeless figure, silent, with hands folded passively on the lap of the black and white checked dress. And after a moment, Pa Garner slipped to his knees and hid his face on the peacefully folded hands.

Ma Garner no longer had need of material things; she had gone up and out of the "Valley of but hoped-for things".

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