

PARNASSUS
ON
WHEELS

MORLEY



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ON
WHEELS

by
Christopher Morley

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To
H. B. F. *and* H. F. M.
"Trusty, dusky, vivid, true"

CHAPTER ONE

I WONDER if there isn't a lot of bunkum in higher education? I never found that people who were learned in logarithms and other kinds of poetry were any quicker in washing dishes or darning socks. I've done a good deal of reading when I could, and I don't want to "admit impediments" to the love of books, but I've also seen lots of good, practical folk spoiled by too much fine print. Reading sonnets always gives me hiccups, too.

I never expected to be an author! But I do think there are some amusing things about the story of Andrew and myself and how books broke up our placid life. When John Gutenberg, whose real name (so the Professor says) was John Gooseflesh, borrowed that money to set up his printing press he launched a lot of troubles on the world.

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Andrew and I were wonderfully happy on the farm until he became an author. If I could have foreseen all the bother his writings were to cause us, I would certainly have burnt the first manuscript in the kitchen stove.

Andrew McGill, the author of those books every one reads, is my brother. In other words, I am his sister, ten years younger. Years ago Andrew was a business man, but his health failed and, like so many people in the story books, he fled to the country, or, as he called it, to the bosom of Nature. He and I were the only ones left in an unsuccessful family. I was slowly perishing as a conscientious governess in the brownstone region of New York. He rescued me from that and we bought a farm with our combined savings. We became real farmers, up with the sun and to bed with the same. Andrew wore overalls and a soft shirt and grew brown and tough. My hands got red and blue with soapsuds and frost; I never saw a Redfern advertisement from one year's end to another, and my kitchen was a battlefield where I set my teeth and learned to love hard work. Our literature was government agricul-

ture reports, patent medicine almanacs, seedsmen's booklets, and Sears Roebuck catalogues. We subscribed to *Farm and Fireside* and read the serials aloud. Every now and then, for real excitement, we read something stirring in the Old Testament—that cheery book Jeremiah, for instance, of which Andrew was very fond. The farm did actually prosper, after a while; and Andrew used to hang over the pasture bars at sunset, and tell, from the way his pipe burned, just what the weather would be the next day.

As I have said, we were tremendously happy until Andrew got the fatal idea of telling the world how happy we were. I am sorry to have to admit he had always been rather a bookish man. In his college days he had edited the students' magazine, and sometimes he would get discontented with the *Farm and Fireside* serials and pull down his bound volumes of the college paper. He would read me some of his youthful poems and stories and mutter vaguely about writing something himself some day. I was more concerned with sitting hens than with sonnets and I'm bound to say I never took these

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threats very seriously. I should have been more severe.

Then great-uncle Philip died, and his car-load of books came to us. He had been a college professor, and years ago when Andrew was a boy Uncle Philip had been very fond of him—had, in fact, put him through college. We were the only near relatives, and all those books turned up one fine day. That was the beginning of the end, if I had only known it. Andrew had the time of his life building shelves all round our living-room; not content with that he turned the old hen house into a study for himself, put in a stove, and used to sit up there evenings after I had gone to bed. The first thing I knew he called the place Sabine Farm (although it had been known for years as Bog Hollow) because he thought it a literary thing to do. He used to take a book along with him when he drove over to Redfield for supplies; sometimes the wagon would be two hours late coming home, with old Ben loafing along between the shafts and Andrew lost in his book.

I didn't think much of all this, but I'm an easy-going woman and as long as Andrew kept

the farm going I had plenty to do on my own hook. Hot bread and coffee, eggs and preserves for breakfast; soup and hot meat, vegetables, dumplings, gravy, brown bread and white, huckleberry pudding, chocolate cake and buttermilk for dinner; muffins, tea, sausage rolls, blackberries and cream, and doughnuts for supper—that's the kind of menu I had been preparing three times a day for years. I hadn't any time to worry about what wasn't my business.

And then one morning I caught Andrew doing up a big, flat parcel for the postman. He looked so sheepish I just had to ask what it was.

"I've written a book," said Andrew, and he showed me the title page—

PARADISE REGAINED

BY

ANDREW MCGILL

Even then I wasn't much worried, because of course I knew no one would print it. But Lord! a month or so later came a letter from a publisher—accepting it! That's the letter An-

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drew keeps framed above his desk. Just to show how such things sound I'll copy it here:

DECAMERON, JONES AND COMPANY
PUBLISHERS
UNION SQUARE, NEW YORK

January 13, 1907.

DEAR MR. MCGILL:

We have read with singular pleasure your manuscript "Paradise Regained." There is no doubt in our minds that so spirited an account of the joys of sane country living should meet with popular approval, and, with the exception of a few revisions and abbreviations, we would be glad to publish the book practically as it stands. We would like to have it illustrated by Mr. Tortoni, some of whose work you may have seen, and would be glad to know whether he may call upon you in order to acquaint himself with the local colour of your neighbourhood.

We would be glad to pay you a royalty of 10 per cent. upon the retail price of the book, and we enclose duplicate contracts for your signature in case this proves satisfactory to you.

Believe us, etc., etc.,

DECAMERON, JONES & Co.

I have since thought that "Paradise Lost" would have been a better title for that book.

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It was published in the autumn of 1907, and since that time our life has never been the same. By some mischance the book became the success of the season; it was widely commended as "a gospel of health and sanity" and Andrew received, in almost every mail, offers from publishers and magazine editors who wanted to get hold of his next book. It is almost incredible to what stratagems publishers will descend to influence an author. Andrew had written in "Paradise Regained" of the tramps who visit us, how quaint and appealing some of them are (let me add, how dirty), and how we never turn away any one who seems worthy. Would you believe that, in the spring after the book was published, a disreputable-looking vagabond with a knapsack, who turned up one day, blarneyed Andrew about his book and stayed overnight, announced himself at breakfast as a leading New York publisher? He had chosen this ruse in order to make Andrew's acquaintance.

You can imagine that it didn't take long for Andrew to become spoiled at this rate! The next year he suddenly disappeared, leaving only

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a note on the kitchen table, and tramped all over the state for six weeks collecting material for a new book. I had all I could do to keep him from going to New York to talk to editors and people of that sort. Envelopes of newspaper cuttings used to come to him, and he would pore over them when he ought to have been ploughing corn. Luckily the mail man comes along about the middle of the morning when Andrew is out in the fields, so I used to look over the letters before he saw them. After the second book ("Happiness and Hayseed" it was called) was printed, letters from publishers got so thick that I used to put them all in the stove before Andrew saw them—except those from the Decameron Jones people, which sometimes held checks. Literary folk used to turn up now and then to interview Andrew, but generally I managed to head them off.

But Andrew got to be less and less of a farmer and more and more of a literary man. He bought a typewriter. He would hang over the pigpen noting down adjectives for the sunset instead of mending the weather vane on the barn which took a slew so that the north wind

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came from the southwest. He hardly ever looked at the Sears Roebuck catalogues any more, and after Mr. Decameron came to visit us and suggested that Andrew write a book of country poems, the man became simply unbearable.

And all the time I was counting eggs and turning out three meals a day, and running the farm when Andrew got a literary fit and would go off on some vagabond jaunt to collect adventures for a new book. (I wish you could have seen the state he was in when he came back from these trips, hoboing it along the roads without any money or a clean sock to his back. One time he returned with a cough you could hear the other side of the barn, and I had to nurse him for three weeks.) When somebody wrote a little booklet about "The Sage of Redfield" and described me as a "rural Xantippe" and "the domestic balance-wheel that kept the great writer close to the homely realities of life" I made up my mind to give Andrew some of his own medicine. And that's my story.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS a fine, crisp morning in fall—October I dare say—and I was in the kitchen coring apples for apple sauce. We were going to have roast pork for dinner with boiled potatoes and what Andrew calls Vandyke brown gravy. Andrew had driven over to town to get some flour and feed and wouldn't be back till noontime.

Being a Monday, Mrs. McNally, the washerwoman, had come over to take care of the washing. I remember I was just on my way out to the wood pile for a few sticks of birch when I heard wheels turn in at the gate. There was one of the fattest white horses I ever saw, and a queer wagon, shaped like a van. A funny-looking little man with a red beard leaned forward from the seat and said something. I didn't hear what it was, I was looking at that preposterous wagon of his.

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It was coloured a pale, robin's-egg blue, and on the side, in big scarlet letters, was painted:

R. MIFFLIN'S

TRAVELLING PARNASSUS

GOOD BOOKS FOR SALE

SHAKESPEARE, CHARLES LAMB, R. L. S.

HAZLITT, AND ALL OTHERS

Underneath the wagon, in slings, hung what looked like a tent, together with a lantern, a bucket, and other small things. The van had a raised skylight on the roof, something like an old-fashioned trolley car; and from one corner went up a stove pipe. At the back was a door with little windows on each side and a flight of steps leading up to it.

As I stood looking at this queer turnout, the little reddish man climbed down from in front and stood watching me. His face was a comic mixture of pleasant drollery and a sort of weather-beaten cynicism. He had a neat little russet beard and a shabby Norfolk jacket. His head was very bald.

"Is this where Andrew McGill lives?" he said.

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I admitted it.

"But he's away until noon," I added. "He'll be back then. There's roast pork for dinner."

"And apple sauce?" said the little man.

"Apple sauce and brown gravy," I said. "That's why I'm sure he'll be home on time. Sometimes he's late when there's boiled dinner, but never on roast pork days. Andrew would never do for a rabbi."

A sudden suspicion struck me.

"You're not another publisher, are you?" I cried. "What do you want with Andrew?"

"I was wondering whether he wouldn't buy this outfit," said the little man, including, with a wave of the hand, both van and white horse. As he spoke he released a hook somewhere, and raised the whole side of his wagon like a flap. Some kind of catch clicked, the flap remained up like a roof, displaying nothing but books—rows and rows of them. The flank of his van was nothing but a big bookcase. Shelves stood above shelves, all of them full of books—both old and new. As I stood gazing, he pulled out a printed card from somewhere and gave it to me: